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NOVEMBER—15¢

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WESTERN FICTION Magazine

JAMES RANDALL
Editor

Vol. IV, No. 4 — A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE — *November, 1938*

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Land of the Gun Damned.....by Ken Jason 8

Sure that Handsome Hurd dry-gulched his brother, Wain Adam of the bankrupt Diamond Four stoked up a feud by trigger-taming Hurd. But Wain's vengeance guns turned the war-torn Caracara into a happy hunting ground for invading boomers, condemned the girl he loved to a living death, and bullet-branded himself for an unmarked grave!

Longriding Lawman.....by Peter Dawson 112

When the citizens of Coyote Wells learned of Sheriff John Branch's owlhoot past, they stripped him of guns and honor. But Sheriff Branch refused to stay exiled —even though his return destined him to boothill!

A SMASHING NOVELETTE

Wild Bunch Reunion.....by Ed Earl Repp 103

A bogus badge-toter staked the trail to Painted Rock with crooked, bounty-hungry lawdogs, and unless Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch pards fogged through that gun gauntlet, their wounded saddlemate was going to perform an air jig pronto!

A THRILLING SHORT STORY

Satan's Segundo.....by Gunnison Steele 98

Into that outpost of hell plunged bushwhacking Flash Hayden—to hurl a bullet barrier around a defenseless tenderfoot's dark-eyed bride. But poisoned whiskey numbed Hayden's gunhands, and a lead-throwing lunatic seared a renegade's epitaph on the gallant gulcher's slug-torn body!

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Over a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Tested and acclaimed by editors of motor publications.

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Make	Cost of New Rings and Rebore	Time of Car Tie-up
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De Soto	62.50	2 days
Dodge	59.20	2 days
Ford	$50 to 55.00	2 days
Buick	80.00	2½ days
Cadillac	151.37	2 days

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Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

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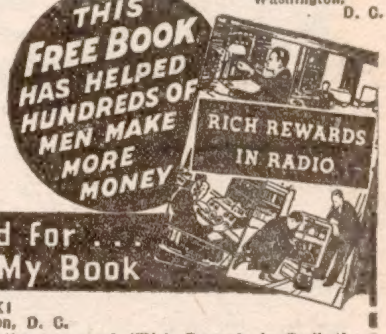

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Old Man Lea pitched downward, and ambush lead plowed through Murch's chest!

Land of

CHAPTER I

Pure Accident

WAIN ADAMS dallied his rope, turned his wiry cow pony onto dry ground, and pulled the wobbly red cow slowly from the muck and slime of Spanish creek overflow. He watched the weak and starved animal, the tenth, go down to its knees, try to rise, stagger and fall, on the dry, frosty rim of the marsh. He saw that the task was almost hopeless—the bogged cattle did not have strength enough to rustle for the meagre feed left on Caracara range even after they were rescued.

The Diamond Four man went after the next. Old Man Lea, the other bog rider, came plopping through the icy mud. "It ain't a bit use, boy. My two ropin' hosses is tuckered out and so's yores." The wrinkled, long-necked veteran of the saddle coiled his rope. "Be an act of mercy to shoot them, ever' head, to put them out their mis'ry, if it wasn't agin the law, they not bein' Diamond Four brand."

the Gun Damned

GREAT BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL **by KEN JASON**

Author of "Let Them Eat Lead," etc.

When Wain Adams of the bankrupt Diamond Four trigger-tamed Handsome Hurd, he stoked up a feud that doomed the open range—by turning the war-torn Caracara into a happy hunting ground for invading boomers. But he also condemned the girl he loved to a living death, while hot lead was lowering him to an unmarked grave!

But Wain Adams, quiet, dogged, undersized, serious of face and mien for one of twenty, kept at it, and the ranch foreman who was his helper lent a willing hand until the last of the other five were dragged to high ground. Then he led the way the half mile to the corrals and sheds and hitched a wagon and brought horse feed, sorely needed hay and oats, for the little bunch saved from the bog. "Pore economy," grumbled Old Man Lea. "It'll jest prolong their sufferin'. Yuh might's well hay-feed them that's on their legs."

Wain admitted to himself that the veteran was right; but he listened in

silence. "Reckon there's more than a thousand head piled up along the southern drift fences of the Caracara. Tommy estimated more."

"Tommy sees double," put in the young cowman.

"*They was more.* It's nigh as bad as the winter of the big die, when me and yore dad turned skinnin' cattle and the bone-pickers got eight dollars a ton. Northers as bad this winter. And them days there wasn't the worry over nesters, Wainey boy."

The younger man's jaw hardened at the mention of nesters. Low as the northers had reduced the stock of the Caracara outfits, the menace of the nesters reached the heart of every cattleman with keener forebodings.

They rode back on the wagon after feeding the little handful of weakened, starved cows and steers. On the way they saw a glaze-eyed cow, hamstrung in broad daylight by a lobo that the rattle of the wagon had driven off. The bovine panted feebly, tongue out, and Wain shot it through the forehead from the wagon seat.

"Good shootin'," commented Murch Lea. "First time I ever see yuh use yore gun, not usually carryin' it. Didn't know yuh could."

"I can't—much. I'm carrying it regular now, for coyotes and lobos, since they got so bad." Wain holstered the forty-five.

"Let's see yore gun." Lea helped himself to the old frontier model forty-five that Harvey Adams, Wain's father, always had carried. "There ain't none better. Needs oilin' a bit. Good thing to know how to use—fast. With nesters comin' in and all. I'll teach yuh some of the polish."

"No. I never tote a gun in town." Wain changed the subject, discussed the spring roundup plans. Wain's brother had been a gun-toter; had died over at West River in a pistol duel. Bill was as big as Wain was undersized; he was a scrapper and fire-eater; the apple of Harvey Adams' eye—and had died at twenty-one. Wain, the runt, remained sober cautious, with the responsibility of getting the Diamond Four out of debt. Wain's father was out of the saddle for good, with a hip affection.

"Them strangers in town—the ones I mentioned—are goin' to stay," commented the wrinkled cowman.

"That so?" Wain was interested. "Funny time for them to come in, with the nester outlook."

"It is." The foreman spat. "Clay Shepard onloaded the Double Spur onto 'em—glad to get clear with them assumin' the notes at the bank." They had reached the Diamond Four corrals.

TOMMY HUEBER, moon-eyed puncher, who had ridden from the Midnight Mountains to the southern drift fence taking stock of the toll of the norther, had other important news. "Charley Arnott's called a meetin' for three this afternoon in the Montana, and wants to see you and Murch," he informed. "Them Ticote cowmen will be there. Handsome Hurd's bought the Double Spur, and we gain a fightin' citizen in Hurd, if reports is true. He hates nesters worse'n sheepherders."

Wain's brows contracted. This Handsome Hurd, whoever he was, wasn't likely coming into a new country merely to fight the homesteaders who were headed toward Caracara valley. Wain saddled silently with Old Man Lea.

They reached Lingo at 2 o'clock. The streets were well filled by men from the big outfits, the Box A, the old YT, the Seven Bar X, the Double Spur and others—drawn there for the cattlemen's meeting. Wain and Murch Lea left their mounts at the hitch rack and looked for Charley Arnott.

"Hyah, boys," greeted a tall, angular, black-eyed rider, dismounting. "Pleasant weather after the storm." Jes LaRue, a small owner on lower Spanish creek, was a familiar figure in Lingo.

"It is that." Wain turned at the slow-jogging approach of four riders he had never seen before. They were a sullen, hard-visaged lot, except the one who rode in their lead. He was a striking figure, big, a tanned blond, like the hero of a Norse saga, in the garb of the range, save for a stiff coat of gray linsey. Wain had seen men like him down in the Fort Worth country. The bunch dismounted and strode into the Montana saloon with a few nods to men they had met.

"Let's go in," suggested LaRue, and Wain and Murch Lea went. Charley Arnott, owner of the Box A, was at the far end of the bar. A knot of cattlemen stood around Charley.

Wain Adams attracted little attention, and he knew it. Although pretty well liked and the real brains of the Diamond Four since Harvey Adams had been incapacitated, Wain was not regarded as a leader in the counsels of the cattlemen. He was under age, to begin with, although he looked older; his figure was short, five feet four on a stretch—and that was a runt in the cow country. His face was largely expressionless, an enigma; eyes blue, calculating; hair light brown, upstanding when his hat was off; nose slightly pugged, not unhandsome; mouth generous, lips straight but not excessively thin. His chin was square, firm. He weighed less than 140 pounds. Not a hero with the girls at the range "infairs" or the fandangoes of Old Town, across the creek.

After drinking with LaRue and Old Man Lea he wandered toward the group about Charley Lea, unnoticed. He was mainly interested in the Ticote cowmen, from the country beyond the Midnights. That bunch stood drinking alone.

Murch Lea nudged him, grinned. "Forgit to take it off?" looking at the young ranchman's holstered gun. Wain had *not* forgotten to take it off, he did not know why. Perhaps he was taking the veteran's advice to wear it, now that the nester invasion was at hand. Perhaps—? He did not know himself.

Charley Arnott was talking. "Box A is in a worse jackpot than any of you, account the drouth, overfed range, northers, coyotes, and Gawd knows what all. The big die's about cleaned us and we ain't the on'y ones stuck for our notes. There ain't no further argument about the range bein' open to nesters in the spring, and the railroad's stretchin' to Caracara, fast. Thing is, we ain't never had an association—never needed one. But now we do, for our mutual protection. If we don't fight we're ruined."

HANDSOME HURD turned back to the bar, listened in languid attitude, his big shoulders sagged carelessly. Wain did not need Jes LaRue's whispered words to tell him: "That's Handsome Hurd." Jes told him news, however, about the others:

"One with the purple splotch on his off cheek is Paint Mustain. I'll tell yuh a story about him some day. Used to be in Ticote country myself. Red-headed one is Pinky Teague. The Mex is Gandara. Every one a gun-fighter!"

"Ever seen a handsomer bunch, not countin' Hurd?" Old Man Lea chuckled. "Jes, yo're quick on the trigger—quicker'n *I used to be.* It would be a show to see yuh cross with them."

"Not me." Jes shrugged. "Onless I have to. They work *teamed.*"

"Cain't be separated?"

"Might. But not by me, especially Hurd himself. He looks meek, but wait—till he makes an enemy!" LaRue shook his head seriously. "He's a panther-man."

"And here's Wainey got his gun on, first time in Lingo," chuckled Old Man Lea, tickling the Diamond Four boss in the ribs. Wain didn't smile. "No offense, Wain, my jokes ain't human."

Wain's eyes flickered, but he held silence. He was not even a trick shot, had never drawn a gun on a man. There was no reason why he ever should have to resort to weapons against another human being, except that there had been three men present when his brother Bill was slain at West River—*and one of the companions of the giant puncher who had killed Bill had a birthmark on his face.*

Charley Arnott had finished his informal discourse. He noticed his neighbor. "Hello, Wainey. How's yore dad makin' it?" He moved over, shaking his shaggy, leonine head.

"Middling, thanks. Your folks all well?"

"Yeh. Come over here." Arnott strode toward the Ticote group at the bar, arm on the little man's shoulder. Wain noticed that LaRue held back.

"Mister Adams, Wain Adams, shake hands with Mister Hurd. And this is Mister Mustain, Mister Teague, Mister Gandara—" The genial Charley Arnott's words trailed off; he gazed astonished. Wain was not shaking hands, but stood ignoring the proffered left of Handsome Hurd, studying the big man's face.

Hurd's superbly chiseled features broke into a disdainful smile. "I'm left-handed," he drawled. The little man of the Diamond Four made no move. The other's bow lips straightened out.

"Adams," repeated Handsome Hurd.

"Adams," repeated Wain, easily. "Ever hear the name before?"

"Don't recollect that I have." His

hand was still out; he switched, extended the right out from the linsey coat.

Charley Arnott squared, faced the Diamond Four man. His look told Wain that to refuse the introduction without giving reason would, in the range code, offer an affront to Arnott. Wain took the hand of Hurd, and the others slowly in turn, while they continued to stare at him in open-mouthed unbelief. There was a mistake—surely this little cowman did not intend to make open foes of them, in a public place.

Other names were spoken by Arnott, friends and neighbors who had not yet become acquainted with the newcomers. The tension eased for a moment.

"What'll it be?" asked the big Ticote man, jerking his thumb toward the crowd, with his eyes on the smallest of the group.

Murch Lea, Tommy Hueber and the others named their drinks. LaRue had sauntered into a side room. Wain Adams met the newcomer's cold, steady look.

"Thanks, Mister Hurd; I'm not drinking."

The giant cowman did not move a muscle, but if a shot had been fired his eyes would not have spoken more. "I saw you drink a minute ago, Adams!" he said, with sinister incisiveness.

"Once a day is my rule." They were fighting words, but Charley Arnott was now out of the equation; Wain had uttered them from deep impulse, without counting the cost. Handsome Hurd's comment surprised him:

"My money's honest cow money, Adams, and I reckon I might have made a mistake, because if I treat you, I'd be obliged to drink on yore money in turn." With a smile he turned his back, raised his glass. He held it untouched by his lips at the words of the little cattleman:

"Yore insinuation is a lie, Hurd!"

CHAPTER II

"Yes Sir!"

THE leader of the Ticote men turned about slowly, the glass going to the bar. His thumb hung at the pocket of his calfskin vest, an attitude intended as a warning and a threat. "Yore Diamond Four money's not honest, Adams, for the reason that when you spend it, you're spending what belongs to Barry Berg and his bank." The blond face clouded.

Wain Adams read the situation aright; each of the Hurd bunch had turned with their chieftain and were ready for gunplay. It flattered the little man who had never drawn a gun on a more menacing foe than a mountain lion or a diamond-back. He was an unknown quantity to them—they were taking no chances, treating him as though he were a Jes LaRue. He had not time to marvel how Handsome Hurd had learned so much about the financial affairs of the Diamond Four, the Ticote cowman must have had some contact with Berg, the banker. All of these things registered on his brain like a clap of sudden thunder, and he acted on the very heels of Handsome Hurd's insult.

Forgetting his own inadequacy as a trained pistol duellist, forgetting everything in the instinctive conviction that the one who had hurled the insult was the slayer of his brother, Wain Adams went for his gun as he would have done at the darting head of a rattler; his arm, wrist and finger muscles responded to the leaping blood within. He surprised himself; his forty-five was out, muzzle leaping on Handsome Hurd. His eye caught the almost imperceptible flash of the hand of Paint Mustain downward, and the gun of the young cowman belched flame and lead, once.

Paint Mustain was crouching, knees out, left hand stabbing at the lacerated right, his big pistol hammered again the bar and to the floor, an easier target than the swift, flat head of a diamond-back that Wain had more than once obliterated into spattering venom. Mustain's face registered hideous rage and surprise that the Diamond Four man did not see, for Wain was watching the hooked thumb of Hurd.

Teague and Gandara stared with bulging eyes, and the big blond of Ticote let his deadly left fingers into the vest pocket to draw forth a packet of brown cigarette papers. His right went slowly for the tobacco pouch in the coat pocket—or was it that?

"Don't!" warned the little cowman. "Before you use yore hands, I'm waiting for you to eat those words, Handsome Hurd."

The Ticote chief shrugged, twisted his faultless mouth into an ungracious smile. "Come down, Adams. Can't you take a joke?"

"Tell the men here you lied."

Hurd frowned, eyes on the glinting gun barrel. "Yes, sir."

"Turn yore backs—all of you."

"Yes, sir." There was mockery in the assent, but Hurd and his men revealed no bulge in the pockets beneath their flannel shirts and sagging vests—or the linsey coat.

"You ever in West River, Hurd?"

"No, sir."

"You, Mustain?"

"Naw." He glared, eyes on his torn, upright fingers.

"Time'll tell. I'm going to find out. And watch how you use yore guns in Lingo." Wain Adams sheathed his weapon with an easy motion, back toward the side wall, and sat at an unoccupied poker table, six-shooter coming out again to lie on the table top. He found himself alone, facing the bar; but only for a moment. Old Man Lea sidled over, spur chains dragging. Jes LaRue emerged from the back room, sat at the table sideways to the bar.

"Fer the love of licker, Wainey," murmured the black-eyed one through half-opened lips, "where'd yuh learn to pull a pistol? And them every one a gunman, and Hurd a devil from the hip! Now you got to watch yore gait, day and night, becose they won't live in Lingo with no man that can say he tamed their four guns at one and the same time. Nada! Gosh, yo've corraled yoreself a rep, Wainey boy!" He made a soft whistling sound. "I'll tell yuh somethin'. I was standin' back there agin the wall, all ready to go diggin' for my Colt when yuh done that draw. You notice they didn't ast me to drink, Wainey?"

"Why not, Jes?"

"They think they seen my face somewheres before, kinda, but ain't shore!"

WAIN was watching the Ticote bunch, who were looking after Paint Mustain's fingers and talking in low tones to Arnott. Old Man Lea was sitting in a state of trance, eyes wandering up and down the little figure of his Diamond Four boss.

"Yes, sir, Wainey," LaRue resumed in his undertone, "this makes a split in the cattle country jest at a time when the nesters is comin' which makes it bad, but if you knowed—" He cut off. "There comes Charley Arnott."

The Box A owner was approaching, and with him were Handsome Hurd and his three friends, also Dish Dishawn, Nafe Bittick and two or three others. The young cowman rose slowly as they neared the table.

"Wain," said Arnott, in his good-natured, genial way, "Mister Hurd is mighty sorry for what happened a minute ago and stands ready to call bygones bygones, for the good of the range, bein' he and his men have come here to live amongst us as neighbors, and we got plenty of troubles to fight, without any ruckuses right here amongst ourselves. Mister Hurd asks me to be spokesman and patch up any misunderstandin' that might have arose."

The Diamond Four man's eyes were on Handsome Hurd, who stood back with a weak attempt at a smile on the bow mouth. Wain held silence; he was determined there should be no friendship with the Ticote cowman until he had checked up carefully on the circumstantial evidence that they were the strangers who had entered West River on the day his brother was slain. Toleration there might be, for the good of the range, until further proof was at hand. At least Wain would leave it up to the other party to the "misunderstanding" to make the overtures.

Handsome Hurd was nodding. "Yes, sir, Mister Adams, that's how my friends and I think about it, I reckon. We're plumb put out that you took it on yoreself to be offended at our little remark—that wasn't intended to be serious. I was just saying to Mister Arnott that there's not a whole pile of time to lose, if we're organizing that Caracara association for our mutual protection, to fight for cattle against nesters, and I'm anxious to have the best of feelings between us-all, since we're going to be neighbors, and—"

"Bridle yore tongue in future, Mister Hurd, and I reckon we can call it a truce."

The Ticote chief's eyes narrowed, but he quickly opened his bow mouth into a wide grin. "Glad to hear you say that, Mister Adams. There's not the slightest bad feelings on my part and—"

Wain Adams nodded curtly. "Let it go at that, Mister Hurd!" He strode toward the door, at a diagonal, with the four newcomers in his line of vision. He knew the chances would be against him should they prove treacherous now and go for their guns. But they did not. Wain reached the street, found Tommy Hueber and Murch Lea at his heels. In a moment they were joined by Jes LaRue.

"Bad blood," murmured LaRue, in an undertone. "Them four's not makin' peace, like they say! They're only layin' low till they git a line on yore past performances with pistols, Wainey. Who's that!"

A cowpuncher was flinging himself from the saddle before the Montana. As he hit the board sidewalk he blurted out in hoarse, excited tones:

"A hundred thousand head of sheep is on the way, crossin' the Midnights from the Dagger range! The men left at the ranches is armin' with Winchesters, and started to head them off."

"G—A'mighty!" Charley Arnott was at the swinging doors. "That's nigh as bad as nesters—if they git through! This meetin's postponed!"

"They won't get through," said Wain Adams, grimly. "What way they coming, Wiggy?"

"Loco Pass!" informed the news bearer. "Be there by mornin', and—"

Handsome Hurd was streaking out of the saloon, past Arnott. "C'mon! Grab every Winchester in town!" He halted an instant before Wain Adams. "Reckon you and I can fight sheep together, Mister Adams!"

The Diamond Four men did not reply, but mounted swiftly.

As he rode, the possibilities of war with Hurd, while they were vivid, did not trouble him; he lost all thought of Hurd in the necessity for immediate action and probably drastic action.

CHAPTER III

Quick Work

No one knew better than Wain Adams the menace of sheep to Caracara Valley. Twice in the last three months invading herders, driven desperate by hard conditions of the range beyond, had been halted before they crossed the mountains. Recently little thought had been given to sheep, due to the coming of the railroad and the rumors that Caracara Valley was to be opened to homestead. But all hands rallied at the immediate emergency. Wain and his companions, Hueber, Lea and LaRue, allowed Handsome Hurd and his three associates to ride ahead. The understanding was that they meet at Loco Pass before daylight, when a plan of action would be mapped fitting the circumstances.

"We keep the sheep out, at whatever cost," Arnott voiced the sentiments of every man in the party. "There ain't no grass left on Caracara range as it is, and what's here ain't for woolies. We'll guard it with Winchesters, every blade, if needed."

They reached the foothills at dark. The long climb up the mountain began. Here in the scrub the best of the remaining cattle of all the outfits grazed, feeding on chaparral pods, leaves and twigs, in the absence of grass below. At midnight they reached snow line, for the month was February. It was three o'clock Tuesday morning when they reached the valley end of the pass. Arnott called the men into parley.

"Wiggy estimates the herders will reach the pass soon after sun-up—may be camped in the upper end now. Mister Hurd came through the pass three days ago, and he thinks the thing to do is to send a couple of men ahead to tell 'em to turn back, pointin' out that if the woolies tries to run the pass they'll get blocked, *and might go over into Loco Gorge.*"

He gestured to the dark drop below, that faded in the haze of clear starlight and crevasse-splotched snow. "What's yore idea, Wain?"

The little Diamond Four owner smiled. Arnott in the past had never asked his opinion about things, perhaps because the Box A man always regarded him as a mere boy. And Arnott had been much impressed by the acquisition of the big Ticote cowman and Hurd's capable hands at a difficult time on the range. Perhaps the gunplay in the Montana was changing Wain in the estimation of all his neighbors, as a grown man more than able to hold up his end.

"Sounds sensible," admitted Wain.

"I'd like to send Wain Adams and Mister Hurd," continued Charley Arnott, "because Mister Hurd had just been through the pass, and Wain will represent the older outfits here."

There was no choice but to accept, unless Wain chose to carry the feud forward at the present time, which he did not. The two loped off in the darkness, and in silence.

It was daylight when they struck the sheep camp, at the top of the pass, on the northern side. They found the herd stirring where they had been bedded down on the slope, where it was clear of snow. A tent was being packed by the dozen-odd herders. Wain had never seen so many sheep, but he judged that Wiggy had exaggerated the number. There were perhaps forty thousand.

The Ticote cowman spoke. "That's the boss, with the six-shooter on." He gestured to a thin, cadaverous-faced individual of muddy complexion, tall and hungry-looking.

"You know him?" demanded Wain quickly.

"The same outfit we passed a week ago, coming in. Said they were going east. Name's Joe Mercedes. He's half Mex."

Wain rode forward, acted as spokesman. He explained that Caracara range was denuded of grass, told of starving and dead cattle on the entire southern range. "You'll have to stop here, without taking another step. If you go on, there's a thousand-foot gorge that'll eat up every head of yore sheep."

This was a hard threat, but Wain Adams knew that in the long run a warning of the feeling of the cowmen was better than soft words. An attempt to force the pass would have brought disaster to the sheep and possible bloodshed.

MERCEDES' eyes burned in feverish desperation. "There ees no grass behind, *amigo?*" he said. "All we ask ees to go through."

"No!" The word was explosive, final. That kind of permission had been granted before, with devastating effect on the range, with murder in its wake. Wain wheeled his mount, and Hurd rode with him for a hundred yards, beyond the turn on the pass trail. Then the Ticote man halted.

"Wait here a minute, Adams, I'm going to tell that damned sheepherder something else!" He turned, galloped back. Wain hesitated, held his mount; to have followed Hurd would have brought no results, he concluded. He rode on ahead, to report to his fellow cowmen the result of the interview. Charley Arnott was pleased that there was to be no fight, but there were hotheads among the cowmen, like Nafe Bittick of Seven Bar X, who were for tearing ahead into the sheep, killing them and scattering them on general principles. "Sheep's p'ison, and ought to be killed, so's they don't eat any other cattle's grass," affirmed Bittick, seriously and earnestly. "Where's Handsome?"

"Coming—in the pass," informed Wain. He and Arnott agreed that the thing to do was to ride back the three miles through the pass to see that the herders carried out their tacit promise. They fell into single-file and took the narrow rock shelf, then spread out where the trail was wider. Half way to the herder camp Wain saw Handsome Hurd rounding the turn ahead, leaning forward in the saddle.

"Sheep's in the pass, coming through!" he shouted, as he came up. "That herder chief lied to me, and they're going to fight their way through —if they can!"

Grim-faced riders milled their horses about the big Ticote cowman. "We'll go back, above the shelf, under cover," asserted Arnott, jaw clicking. Five minutes later they had found vantage points behind rocks, boulders and cedars, at the highest point of Loco Gorge. Wain Adams, Charley Arnott and Handsome Hurd were together. The little man turned to Hurd.

"What did that herder say to you, and what did you say to him, that made him change his mind?"

The Ticote cowman's eyes glinted. "I'm not answering to you, Adams! But I told him he'd be shot, if he came on, and he said he'd kill the first hombre that interfered with his sheep. How's that?"

"He did, eh?" asked Wain slowly. "That herder a friend of yours, Hurd?"

"You watch and see." Hurd turned aside, watched the trail. Wain Adams turned his horse out.

"I'm going to have a word with Mercedes when he comes up," he announced.

"Reckon he can be turned back, without bloodshed."

"And he'll pot you on sight," hummed the Ticote chief.

"We'll see." Wain took his place in the open, beside the trail.

There was a half hour's wait; then came the soft, incessant "ba-a," "ba-a" of countless little throats, the sound of sharp-hoofed burros on the rocky floor of the trail, the occasional yap of dogs. When the advance pack animal and its custodian hove into view round the turn, Wain Adams saw that it was Joe Mercedes, his thin, cadaverous face turning uneasily from left to right scanning the wall of the pass. The sheep army, divided into a great number of bands—Wain could not estimate how many were behind the turn—came on, each with its custodian in front and rear, its dogs and goat bell leader, each with its black-sheep markers. As Mercedes drew nearer, Wain turned into the trail. He approached the herder, an eye on the half-breed's swinging holster.

"Didn't I tell you to turn yore blats back?" he demanded.

"*Si, señor.*" The breed's eyes bulged. "But the other man, he come back and say you have no authority—that the other men all say I can go through if I do not stop but for water and the foothill *chamisal.*"

Wain's features hardened. "Are you lying, Mercedes?"

"No, *señor!* Ees it not true, what the other man say?"

"No."

THE herder's face paled. "But I cannot go back, *señor!* To turn these sheep here will be impossible—they weel go over into the cañon! They—"

A shot from the hillside broke the sentence, and Wain Adams saw the rock behind which Arnott and Hurd were hidden. Joe Mercedes spun dizzily, clutching for his gun, firing toward the slope. The Diamond Four man was upon him, six-shooter leveled, and disarmed him. He saw a trickle in the herder's bronzed left forearm, saw he was not fatally wounded. Another shot spat hot lead from the hillside. A sheep bolted a few feet, slumped dead on the trail. Wain hustled Mercedes to a ledge in the defile. As he looked back his ears rang with the fast and bitter bark of six-shooters and rifles, from the near range of the pass slope. Sheep were being slaughtered. Wain bolted out to rejoin his fellows, to halt the butchery, but he was too late. A fear-crazed ewe somersaulted over the edge of the trail; others, in their nonsensical, unthinking manner were catapulting after her into the gorge. Winchesters were snapping now toward the band immediately behind, and the slow-moving bunch behind that. The herders had sought cover in the chaparral.

Wain Adams saw his fellow cowmen working their way along the slope overlooking the turn in the pass; he knew from their firing that they were repeating the execution on up the trail. Wain scurried up to the boulder where Arnott and Hurd had been. A still, huddled form under the rock arrested him. He saw the slain herder was a Mexican boy of fifteen or sixteen.

"Charley Arnott wouldn't do that!" he muttered.

The Diamond Four man was a hater of sheep; it had been bred in him to detest the range-devastators since infancy. But this example of treachery on the part of Handsome Hurd sickened him, and when, on the complete destruction of the sheep and the routing of their guardians, he learned that Arnott had left the boulder alone to Hurd immediately after the first shot was fired, Wain Adams resolved that the Ticote cowmen were a greater menace to the Caracara range than even the oncoming nesters.

CHAPTER IV

Too Old to Fight

ON the way in, Wain Adams rode apart from the others, thinking. But Old Man Lea, Tommy Hueber and Jes LaRue hovered near, and away from the bunch made up of Charley Arnott, Handsome Hurd and their friends. LaRue finally drew up beside the Diamond Four man. There was something about the black-eyed Frenchman that Wain liked.

"You ever know Hurd to be in West River, Jes?" Wain felt himself drawn to LaRue partly because the other knew

much of the Ticote men.

"Can't say that I do. Wouldn't advise yuh to ask questions, Wain, till yo're ready to go clean through."

"I am."

"I'm makin' a play soon," said LaRue, enigmatically, "and then you'll know somethin'."

Wain's brows drew into a frown. "If what Handsome's done today is a sample, I don't reckon this range is big enough to hold us both," he said, slowly. "You know, he decoyed that herder through, after I warned him off."

"H-m!" LaRue's eyes widened. "He done *that*, eh? Sounds like him. But yuh can't make a play on that, boy."

"I don't understand."

"Listen. Condition the range is in, and all, it would make a hero of Hurd if that was known—showin' how he hates sheep. Keep it mum, I would, if I was you."

LaRue fell behind. Wain turned it over seriously the remainder of the ride in. The Frenchman was right. Now was not the time to make a showdown with Handsome Hurd over the sheep incident—not even over the killing of the herder boy. The victim's boss had exchanged shots with the cowmen, and besides Wain had no absolute proof that Hurd had fired the shot that slew the unarmed boy. And if he had, Hurd would be excused on the ground that a battle was on.

WAIN Adams must bide his time.

When the young cowman reached the Diamond Four he discovered that his father had heard the news of events in the Montana. The elder Adams, propped up in a high-backed chair before the fireplace, demanded his version of the meeting with Hurd, listened in silence until he was through. Then he smiled.

"You've skipped half of it, from what Trig says."

"Trigger's got a good imagination."

"Yeah, but you've told enough. Come here." The wrinkled invalid wrung his hand. "I was afraid yuh wasn't made on that pattern, son! You was always more like yore mother. Dang me, I'm glad yuh done that gunplay! Even if yuh was wrong, and made a mistake in selectin' Hurd and his waddies to show yo're like Bill."

"You ever heard of Hurd?" asked Wain, slowly.

"Not till Charley Arnott told me of his arrival. It looks like we'd need men like Hurd on Caracara range soon, Wain!"

The younger man was silent. He refrained from voicing his suspicions that the Ticote men may have been the slayers of his brother—Bill's taking off always was an exciting and nerve-wracking subject with Harvey Adams in his weakened condition, and the son tried always to avoid bringing it up. Time enough for that when the facts were more conclusive.

"Yes, I'm glad yuh done that in the Montana, Wain. Time's come to fight. I'm deedin' you the Diamond Four land—deed's made out—since yo're takin' it on yoreself to clean them debts, son."

"Deeding me the land! No, I can't take it—"

"Don't argue, Wain—she's done. Them notes—you reckon you can lift 'em, spite of drouth and nesters?"

"They'll be paid, dad, but—"

"Settled. Mayhap you cain't pay 'em, with the outlook what it is, but the little thousand acres deeded land will prove Harvey Adams done what he could. I'm too old to fight. You ain't. Remember this: Hurd's a cowman, and we've got to stick together. Read this." He extended a letter, pointed to the bottom paragraph:

> "Nothing can change it now. The land will be open to entry in the spring and with the railroad through, the settlers will be there."

"From the senator?"

"Yes. If the fences come down on the free government range we use, and the nesters comes in, every outfit on the Caracara will be ruined."

The veteran owner voiced what Wain had been thinking of for many weeks. "You don't think we can fight the government, do you, dad?"

"No, son, not the government. But we can stop the politicians that's sold out to the railroad and the land boomers, son."

"How?"

The old man's shaggy gray brows kindled. "With Winchesters, like Trig Malone heard that man Hurd say. I come onto this range twenty years ago, Wain, when there wasn't a fence; we got rich

off twelve dollars a head, calves not countin'. This Caracara valley was a wilderness before that. We settled it, me and Charley Arnott and Dish Dishawn and a few more—reclaimed it from panthers and lobos. When the range got overstocked, too many cowmen comin' in, we had to fence, each outfit accordin' to its needs, on government land. Then we got less than we had under free grass and no fences. Now what are we goin' to do, set still and let the nesters come in and reap the harvest after we sweated in the lean years to build up the country? No, you know we ain't goin' to do that, Wain. I'm too old to fight. You ain't."

"I reckon we'll pull out, dad." Wain turned away, in deep thought. He knew that only pride in the Adams name had induced his father to make the compact for the deeded land in exchange for paying off the notes at the bank. To have refused to accept the Diamond Four holdings would have been to say to Harvey Adams that the land wasn't worth the debts, that he was a bankrupt. The sick man had enough worries without that.

BUT Wain was certain that, war or no war Handsome Hurd was not the man to captain the cattlemen. Yet the next few days brought realization that Hurd had entrenched himself greatly in the estimation of his neighbors by his ruthless tactics with the sheepherders. That and his mere assumption of authority. It took a strong man to impress Charley Arnott, and Hurd, whatever his faults, was no weakling.

This was proved the next afternoon, in another way. Wain had been to Lingo and Jes LaRue made it his business to ride part way home with the Diamond Four man, on the way to the Box A.

"I'm goin' to tell Charley Arnott some things about the Ticote outfit," said LaRue. "Then I'll tell you."

"Why not now?"

"I want to see how Arnott takes it. Things is gettin' desp'rit, from the range viewpoint. It was all right with us as long's we had influence in Washington, but now the senator cain't help us none, with the politicians agin him. Railroad gettin' its right-of-way showed that."

Wain did not deny it.

"Reckon we made a mistake when we left them Land Office surveyors start townshipin' and sectionizing the range. Hurd's for fightin' 'em, yet. Mayhap he's right—about *that*. But—"

"What?"

"I'll mention it later. Diamond Four is in a bad way, financially, like Box A and the rest of us?"

"We're all in the same boat, maybe Arnott and my dad have the most outstanding paper."

"What I thought. Time was when even I was rated rich. Yore dad was rated the weathliest cattleman on Caracara range, got rich on his theory, one-fourth calves, one-twelfth steers, the steers sellin' for velvet, the remainin' calves swellin' the herd every year. But we hung on too long, till the range was overstocked and the good grass went. When yore dad started in, a section on this range would feed five hundred head; now twenty acres won't feed a steer. Not countin' the hellish winter, the railroad and the nesters. The cattle that the bank advanced money on are nigh gone. You know that."

"Yes." Wain wondered why the recital of known facts.

"Barry Berg of the bank is a hard man. Mayhap you and Arnott will understand how Hurd horns in, after I tell some things 'bout my Top-Hat brand."

"Tell 'em."

"Not now. On'y this: Handsome never forgives, and you've made a life enemy of him, spite of anything he says or does. Watch him, day and night. Him and his gunmen have come in here for a purpose, and they'll stay, not stoppin' at murder. That is, they'll stay, onless *you* drive 'em out. Yo're the on'y man known that ever called the gang of 'em, and lived to remember it."

"Maybe that was a lucky accident, Jes."

"Accident? If so, I'd call it onlucky." LaRue's black eyes were serious. "I'm leavin' here. See yuh later, after I talk to Charley."

Jes LaRue turned off. As he did so, Wain saw Old Man Lea riding up the trail from Lingo, toward him. The Diamond Four owner waited. Then he saw a lone horseman cutting across the valley back of Murch Lea, in the direction taken by Jes LaRue.

"Who's that?" demanded Wain, when Lea came up.

"It's Hurd—he was back of me."

"We'd better go see why he's streaking so fast." The two Diamond Four men galloped to overtake LaRue. They reached him as Handsome Hurd was swerving down a little slope on the Frenchman. Wain heard his sharp words:

"You and me have met before, LaRue." The Ticote cowman turned to Wain. "You and yore man are not horning in on a private quarrel, Adams?" he demanded.

"Depends. There's going to be a square deal." Wain faced the big blond, who he noted wore the gray livery coat.

"How's this?" Hurd flopped his Colt gun to the ground, a few feet in front of his bronco's head. He had turned his back to Wain and Old Man Lea and was watching LaRue.

THE challenged rider, a smile on his lips, lifted his weapon from its holster slowly, tossed it into the dust before his own mount.

Both men left the saddle at once. Two figures bent, clutched for their guns. To the onlookers it seemed that the lean Frenchman would have the advantage over the giant; but Handsome Hurd's gun belched before his knees straightened and LaRue flopped back in the act of firing, a bullet through his heart.

"That square deal enough?" queried the Ticote chief, turning, his panther frame relaxed, holstering his frontier forty-five. The act had been unbelievably swift; the gun leap invisible.

Wain Adams knew that, in the law of the range, Handsome Hurd had fought his man fairly, in a duel in which the challenged had accepted the challenger's terms. He answered quietly: "Fair—yes, that fight was fairer than the one that took the sheep boy in Loco Pass. Fork yore horse, Mister Hurd."

The Ticote man smiled, puzzlement about the bow mouth; he mounted. Wain let his gun leap out into the sand.

Hurd sat unmoving, his green-gray eyes moving slowly from the man to the dropped revolver. He shook his large head negatively. "I don't aim to fight you, Mister Adams, because there's no quarrel, and you and I have got to ride together, as neighbors, to fight for Caracara range."

Wain Adams' blue eyes filmed over in lethal meaning. "I'll take up my gun, Mister Hurd." He swung down, holstered the weapon, and was in the saddle again. "But with the understanding that yore proffer of friendship is made for a purpose. There's war between us, Hurd, as long as you remain on Caracara range. You can break the news to yore killer crew that the Diamond Four makes peace with sheepherders before it makes peace with you. Better ride, now!"

The finely chiseled features of the Ticote cowman held a suave and tranquil self-assurance and confidence in his own prowess as he turned, without a word, and rode toward lower Spanish creek.

CHAPTER V

The Case of Derrick

OLD MAN LEA rode to the Box A and brought a wagon and Wain and his wrinkled foreman took Jes LaRue to his near-bankrupt Top Hat ranch on the lower creek. Returning toward the Diamond Four, Wain and his companion met Charley Arnott, on the way from town. Arnott heard the news of the killing in silence. He changed the subject. "The mail just come in before I left, and the government is throwin' open the Caracara range to entry November 15. That is, the Land Office says so, but it'll never come. We've got to show the country the sentiment here. Soon's LaRue is buried we'll hold that meetin', and take action."

"Did Jes ever say anything to you about Hurd?" queried Wain, pointedly.

"Nary a word. Why?" He looked puzzled.

"He was on the way, when this happened."

"There was bad blood between 'em, from the day Hurd arrived. I reckon the best man won. Jes had a record with guns in the north."

Wain said no more. Nothing happened for three days, except a good-sized funeral for Jes LaRue and his quiet burial by the town undertaker-merchant, Harry Bangor. Charley Arnott and Wain Adams paid Bangor for the expenses. The air seemed charged with foreboding,

now that the dreaded "open to entry" step had been taken in Washington, and the date fixed. It was evidenced at LaRue's funeral, where no open word was uttered in criticism of Handsome Hurd, who had settled a standing feud according to the feudist's unwritten law. It was evidenced at the general store, the Montana saloon, the Maverick, the Silver King. Men said little, thought much. Wain Adams thought harder than any of them.

Then Charley Arnott called the postponed cattlemen's meeting. Owners and their trusted men from all of Caracara Valley assembled in the rear warehouse of Harry Bangor's store. Old Man Lea joined Wain on the sidewalk before they went in, drew his employer aside.

"Hurd's doin' talkin'," he said, sourly. "Says he don't know any other explanation of yore attitude except there's a woman in it."

WAIN almost laughed; he saw Murch Lea was serious. "A woman in it?" he repeated.

"Yeah. Drawed me aside down the street awhile ago, and said it, like he said it to others."

"Reckon it's a horse on me. Who's the lady?"

"Must 'a' meant Judy Arnott, since he mentioned you might be ringtailed over him callin' around at the Box A a lot lately."

The Diamond Four owner stared vacantly past his faithful foreman. Thought of Judy Arnott, other than as a childhood chum and good friend, had never entered his head. But it fired the little cowman's blood that Handsome Hurd should find an interest in either of the two young daughters of Charley Arnott.

"Hurd lies," he said quietly, and the two walked into the store and back to the warehouse. "Of course he does," agreed Lea. "He's tryin' his dangdest to git in yore good graces, for some reason."

Charley Arnott called the meeting to order. "Some of us has talked it over and come to the conclusion it's better not to form an association," he explained. "A crooked law might reach us quicker if we did. We can act as individuals. Every man by now knows about the openin' to nesters bein' fixed for November 15 next. Another thing that's news. Them eight government men that's been sectionizin' ain't all surveyors. Paint Mustain stuck his nose in, and found out. Mister Hurd can tell you-all about that." He gestured to the Ticote cowman, standing near the front.

Hurd, looming big in the assembly, moved beside a pile of boxes, cleared his throat. "Mister Arnott is right. Paint's been doing some detective work. Two of those so-called Land Office surveyors sectionizing our fenced range are nothing but plain land boomers. Friends of the politicians with a pull, to get in here and make maps under government protection. One of those boomers is named Skinner, the big, ugly hombre that looks like a preacher." He held up a newspaper. "I'll read you an advertisement that Skinner is printing in Kansas City." Clearing his throat again, he read:

> **"Government land, in the Caracara Valley, rich as the delta of the Nile! Free land and a home for the land hungry! Soil adapted to wheat, corn, long-staple cotton, alfalfa, grapes, fruit, vegetables, nuts, berries, dairying! Railroad reaches Providence, new town within one mile of land. One hundred and sixty acres free, Uncle Sam's gift. I will locate you for a nominal fee. See J. B. Skinner, Hadlock Building."**

Handsome Hurd folded the newspaper slowly, handed it out for examination. "My idea is that we can stop this surveying party and these boomers now and here, easier than a train-load of nesters later on." He stepped aside. There were murmurs of approval, though no enthusiastic acclaim from grim and cautious cattlemen who would not commit themselves finally without considering the consequences. Wain Adams held his place besides Murch Lea, knowing that once the minds of these men had been made up, they would go through with what they began. He considered Hurd's plan on its merits, without prejudice.

"You've heard yore neighbor," said Charley Arnott, in even tones. "His plan sounds reasonable. These men, backed up by the boomers and politicians, have no right to cut up our grazin' ground that we've got our livelihood off of for twenty years. I'll entertain a mo-

tion to appoint Mister Hurd on a committee to notify these surveyors to leave the country."

Such a motion was put and carried, and Wain Adams, weighing the cause of the cattlemen over his antipathy to Hurd, voted for it. Charley Arnott saved him from voicing an objection to Handsome Hurd acting for the range alone. "This committee ought to have three men on it," said the Box A owner. "I'll name Wain Adams with Mister Hurd, Wain representin' the oldest outfit on the Caracara. The other man—"

"Yoreself!" insisted Nafe Bittick. Others voiced approval.

"I'm willin', if there's no objections. There ain't any further business." The meeting broke up as informally as it had begun. Wain Adams, strangely enough, was glad he was on that committee; he did not know why unless it was to check any reckless move on the part of Hurd.

WHEN the throng disbanded around three o'clock on that February afternoon, Wain Adams waited for Arnott, and the three committeemen rode down from Lingo to Sandy Gulch, where the surveyin' parties' main camp was located. They were astonished to find three extra tents and a dozen more men than had been there that same morning.

"Actin' swift," commented Arnott, dryly, as they started toward the weather-soiled tent. "These extry hombres come in t'day, same time the announcement fixin' the entry date was made."

"Yeah," murmured Hurd. "We're acting just in time. They likely have four chiefs of the party here now, with a bunch of rodmen, chainmen, brushmen and flagmen. Man we want to see is the U. S. land surveyor. This job ain't let on contract."

Arnott gazed on the big cowman in admiration. "You've had experience in government land matters before?" he queried.

"Some. Enough to know this range has never been surveyed, except the base point. That first party's made a good start running the township lines. Paint and I were over it, a few days ago. Here we are now!"

A man in flat broad hat, whipcord breeches and high-lace boots met them at the first tent. Arnott did the talking and he made it brief, finding he was addressing U. S. Land Surveyor Fred Derrick.

"We won't leave," announced Derrick, a clean-cut man of forty, in quiet tones. "If you try to drive us out, you'll have the whole U. S. army on your backs."

"That won't worry us a iota," grunted Arnott. "What authority you got to bring land sharks like Skinner in here?"

"That's our business." As he spoke a tall, gaunt individual with heavily-lined countenance and deep-set burning eyes came slowly forward. "I'm Skinner—J. B. Skinner. We're here by the authority of congress, and the great people of the—" Derrick gave him a meaningful look, turned his back and went within the tent, guiding the boomer with him.

The three cowmen turned their mounts swiftly and left. Wain Adams had not spoken a word during the parley, and he did not speak now. Handsome Hurd extended a cigarette, which the little cattleman refused.

"It's up to them," asserted the Ticote cowman. "They're running a bluff. They'll pack their traps, before morning."

Wain rejoined Old Man Lea in town. He asked his foreman a question: "Do you reckon there might be such a thing as trick branding before the roundup?"

Lea knitted his shaggy brows. "Meanin' the Ticote bunch? I been thinkin' of that. It would explain why they come. But it's hard to tell, before we count."

"I'm going to ride to lower Spanish creek, to see what I can see. If I fail to show in the morning, you'll know where I went."

He left his foreman after Handsome Hurd, Paint Mustain, Pinky Teague and Gandara had ridden southeast with Dish Dishawn. It was a fruitless night, for he saw no rustling.

In the morning he discovered that Hurd was a good prophet. The surveyors had packed their traps, and left hurriedly. Derrick was slain during the night, as he lay sleeping in his tent. The others had fled the country forthwith, leaving the field to the cattlemen, for the time being, knowing that the range had struck.

CHAPTER VI

The Law-Bringers

THE ninth of February, marking the slaying of Derrick and the flight of the surveyors, was succeeded by a week of calm; a calm, however, that held within it the portend of a peaceful afternoon before a norther on the winter range. The date was to be a memorable one on the Caracara, one not to be forgotten by Wain Adams or the country. Harry Bangor sent the body to West River, the county seat, on instructions from Sheriff Nat Whipple, to await disposition from the east. The sheriff came over to Lingo, asked some perfunctory questions and departed.

Still the tension did not pass; though men did not talk openly about the murder. There was a feeling that things had overreached themselves; a painful effort on the part of everyone to forget the incident. But Wain Adams could not forget it, even after six days passed and no further questions asked.

For one thing, Wain knew that no one blamed him for the assassination of the government man. No one would think of Charley Arnott, mild-mannered and kindly, in that connection. As for Handsome Hurd, his alibi was perfect, and, strangely enough so was that of each of his three Ticote employees Mustain Teague and Gandara. The four of them had bunked at the Old YT of Dish Dishawn, after the three punchers had left Lingo with their chief. Dishawn's word was above reproach, and Wain had the facts from personal knowledge. He had ridden toward lower Spanish creek that evening, in the wake of the Ticote men, had seen them turn off with Dishawn to the Old YT, and had spent much of the night on the Double Spur trail watching for signs of rustling.

"But somebody murdered Derrick," he reflected doggedly, for the hundredth time. "Suspicion sure points to one of us. I know Arnott's as innocent as I am, and if Hurd had a hand in it, he's covered his tracks."

Then, on the seventh day, the law of the east began to swing into action. This time it was not the sheriff, friend of the cattlemen, who rode into Lingo from West River—but U. S. Marshal Hildebrand. He brought twenty men. Those twenty were not a match for the band that Caracara valley could have summoned, but there was something dolefully methodical and awe-inspiring in the mere presence of the lawbringers, and they were watched in silence. They made no arrests, did not seem ready for that yet. They quartered themselves in Barry Berg's big townhouse the first night and started out at daybreak next morning, armed with rifles, sidearms and wire-cutters.

Wain Adams watched them across the Diamond Four on the unpatented range. His house-ridden father, from the window, saw the officers far in the distance, halting at intervals, then proceeding. While the cattle country marked time for another week, the marshal's men cut the barbed wire in five hundred places on government land, dragged out fence posts for stretches of a mile, and left the range virtually wide open, without fence. Something had been done that never could have been accomplished the previous week, viewed with sullen acquiescence by the cowmen, owing to the murder of Land Surveyor Derrick.

Wain Adams considered this fact. It did not always pay to fight fire with fire.

And the surveyors came back, this time without the two men who had been marked down as land boomers and speculators, but they came, with a new leader in place of Derrick, and they spent the entire months of March and April, including Sundays, through the roundup season, running the north-and-south township lines, the east-and-west range lines, grubbing mesquite roots, clearing brush for transit, rod and chain. Marshal Hildebrand and two of his men stayed with them.

The cattlemen could have driven them out but they did not. Wain discussed the situation with his invalid father. "We made a mistake when we bucked the government, even if I was one that voted that way. Then when Derrick was murdered, who knows, maybe one of his own party, it threw suspicion on the cattle country, intimidated all of us and now we've got armed U. S. officers fighting the battles of the nesters."

HARVEY ADAMS fingered his long mustache. "No, Wain, where you-all made the mistake was in not havin'

yore armed men at the fences to meet the marshal's wire-cutters. They'd have turned tail; and if they hadn't, and there'd been a battle, the east would have woke up. It would have showed up the politicians and schemers, there'd have been an investigation in congress, we'd have been called to present our side, and the country would have seen we was right, as the men that conquered the wilderness. Men that ain't got guts to fight for their rights don't deserve 'em, and the world loves a fighter. Mark my words, yo're lettin' snakes come in that's goin' to strike and ruin yuh. There ain't grass enough now, and when half of it's robbed from us, we're done."

There was much in what the elder Adams said, Wain admitted to himself, but he did not further argue the question of expediency. His views were unchanged. The government was too big to fight. The nester peril must be met in some other way, he did not know how.

The melting of the last of the snow on the Midnight peaks saw the feverish rushing of work to lay the steel and wood highway directly into the valley. The field engineers appeared at the terminal; the railroad section of 640 acres that had been reserved for a townsite two miles east of Lingo became the center of a sweating, swearing army of workmen, bosses, engineers, teamsters. Freight was pushing forward on the slowly advancing rails. The townsite was named Providence a little city of tents. The canvas tops would soon go down and frame and brick buildings take their place.

One day in town Wain met Charley Arnott. There had not been a meeting of the cattlemen since the invasion of the U. S. marshal. Now Arnott had troublesome news.

"There's rumors that these three officers are still workin' on the Derrick case," said the Box A owner. "If they arrest either you or Hurd, not countin' me, the committee appointed that afternoon we'll stand behind yuh to a man."

"Arrest me?" queried the little cowman, slowly. "Why should they arrest me?"

"Barry Berg hears they're plannin' to take yuh for murder, Wain."

Wain laughed it off, but he felt more concern than he revealed. He left with Arnott's renewed pledge that the country was behind him no matter what happened. He rode home in sober thought. While Hurd had a unshakable alibi for the night of February 8-9, Wain had none. He had spent the night alone, on the lower Spanish trail, trying to learn something of Hurd's affairs; had not got back to the Diamond Four until 3 o'clock in the morning.

But nothing came of it during several succeeding days. The U. S. officers were moving slowly, if at all. Wain breathed easier. Charley Arnott called another meeting for the first of May. The gathering was held behind closed doors, at the Box A ranchhouse, and those who entered were carefully scrutinized before they were admitted. Among those present was the pudgy, oily-visaged Barry Berg.

"There's goin' to be an arrest in the Derrick case," explained Charley Arnott. "One of our committeemen that notified the surveyors to make tracks is to be jailed, accordin' to the information that leaked to Mister Berg. My idee is that we won't let this gentleman be jailed, no matter who he is. What's yore pleasure?"

Wain Adams sat silent, while with unanimous acclaim those present declared no man of that committee would be taken to jail without a pitched battle with the armed forces of Caracara valley. No name was mentioned; had his own name been brought into the discussion, Wain would promptly have taken the floor and demanded that the law be allowed to take its course. But such a move, if Arnott or Hurd were arrested, would have come from him in very ill grace.

That ended the business of the evening. Mrs. Arnott and the two girls, Judy and Coe, served coffee, cornbread and wild honey. The older of the girls Judy, tiny, twenty, hazel-eyed, vivacious, Wain had not seen since the day Old Man Lea told him of Handsome Hurd's remark that the girl must be the cause of Wain's enmity. They had gone to school together, attended parties at the neighboring ranches; Wain had heard their names linked once or twice, "in fun," because of their diminutive sizes; nothing more. The little cowman had noted in the last year that Judy became silent in his presence, and when they met, which was rarely, he, too had little to say. Tonight was no exception.

When the gathering broke up and

Wain went to the corral shed for his horse he was stopped by a man who displayed a star. He recognized one of Marshal Hildebrand's deputies.

"You're wanted at the U. S. marshal's office in the postoffice" said the deputy, tersely. "You can ride in with me."

"Thanks. What's the occasion?" Wain Adams swung up on his cowpony, turned alongside the officer.

"The Derrick case." Wain Adams stiffened at the sudden rush of horsemen from the upper end of the shed. Nafe Bittick spurted up in the lead, eyed the deputy coldly in the moonlight.

"Yo're not takin' this man," he said, easily.

Arnott, afoot, moved up, laid his hand over the cheek strap of the officer's horse. "It'll pay you to leave—alone," he said, meaningly. "Every gun on the range stands back of this man."

"No, Charley, I'll go," asserted Wain Adams, grimly. He turned aside with the deputy.

CHAPTER VII

A Killing That Would Not Down

THE deputy was close-mouthed about any evidence that may have been obtained by the marshal's office in the Derrick case, as was to be expected, and Wain Adams asked no questions except one, whether the officer had a warrant. The deputy did not answer even that, and he appeared highly nervous over the shadowy figures in the saddle who were following the two men into Lingo at that late hour.

"They won't make any trouble," assured Wain. "Coming in to see what's going on."

The officer was thankful for the assurance; he introduced himself as Henry Derrick, brother of the man who had been slain, and lapsed again into silence. It was midnight when they reached the marshal's small quarters, desk room in the postoffice. A light was burning, and Henry Derrick led the way in to the clean-shaven, steel-gray haired man of fifty at the desk.

"Sit down." Hildebrand indicated a chair.

"Am I under arrest?" queried the little cowman, as the marshal leaned back, hands behind his head, and eyed him keenly under the glare of the oil-lamp reflector. Instantly Wain regretted his own question.

"Know any reason why you should be?" countered Hildebrand.

"No, sir."

"Of course, you're innocent, to start with—never scarcely handled a gun, even." A twinkle in the sharp light eyes took away part of the sting of the sarcasm. Wain reflected that neither Derrick nor Hildebrand had tried to disarm him.

"Where was you on the night Derrick, the surveyor, was killed?"

Wain hesitated. To have told the truth would have meant throwing suspicion on Handsome Hurd, for other reasons than those that concerned the federal man. If a fellow cowman admitted he had trailed Hurd as a suspected cattle thief—even though no evidence was adduced—it would have been taking an unfair advantage, Wain believed. "I rode down toward lower Spanish creek," he said casually.

"You wasn't home that night?"

"I got home about three in the morning."

"Why'd you ride to Lower Spanish creek?"

"On business pertaining to Diamond Four cattle." That was the truth, though it was evasive.

"Hm-m. Funny time of night to be riding the range, if you wasn't herdin', Adams. Was you with anybody that could verify your movements?"

"No. I was alone."

Hildebrand sat stiff and unmoving. "You and Hurd and Arnott visited the Sandy Gulch camp of the surveying party the evening before Derrick was murdered?"

"Yes, sir."

"What for?"

"Told them their presence wasn't desired on Caracara range, cutting up the cattle land." This much, Wain realized, was generally known, and the surveyors themselves had told the officers of it.

"Why such a warning, Adams?"

"We figured such a step might start an investigation in Washington, attracting attention to the wrong done us."

"Who sent you, Hurd and Arnott with that message?"

"I can't answer that question."

"You refuse to answer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Even if it brings your arrest on a charge of murder?"

"Yes, sir."

Hildebrand fingered his cartridge belt. "The movements of Arnott and Hurd on the night of the murder are known," he said slowly. "That mean anything to *you?*"

"No, sir."

"It might."

"Are you making threats? If you've got evidence, Mister Hildebrand, it's yore duty to arrest."

"I know my duty, Adams."

"I RECKON you do."

The marshal's eyes narrowed. "Our office has information that you are a dangerous gunman, Adams, drawing on Hurd and a number of his friends in the Montana saloon. Why did you do that?"

"It was a private matter."

"A lot of your conduct private, eh, Adams?"

"Some of it."

"You and Hurd enemies?"

"He apologized for an insult. We've kept the peace since."

"Serving notice on government men to leave the country, eh?"

"That's a closed incident. Yore men haven't been disturbed since."

"Maybe it ain't closed. You're the owner of the Diamond Four now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your ranch owes the bank eight thousand dollars on a series of notes?"

Wain Adams' eyes glinted. "Barry Berg's been talking, has he?"

"You haven't answered."

"That matter doesn't concern you, Mister Hildebrand."

"I'm trying to determine if you're a man that would be apt to leave the country, pending further investigation of the Derrick murder. If I thought you might, I wouldn't have called you in for questioning, Adams, but would have placed you under arrest, pending indictment. I could have jailed you, on suspicion."

"And made a mistake. You know yore duty."

"The government doesn't make mistakes. That's why we've moved slow, in spite of the information of Handsome Hurd, because we found out that you and Hurd are enemies, in spite of what you say."

The Diamond Four owner smiled sourly. "Information of Handsome Hurd," he repeated in sing-song tones.

"Suspicions. He's clear; so's Arnott. *He thought you mightn't be.*"

"I savvy. What are you going to do about it?"

"You're cool, Adams—either a hard one, or innocent. Your eyes set deep, for a boy. I believe you're a killer."

"You're welcome."

"You got nothing to say about your friend Hurd?"

"Nothing."

"I won't arrest you—yet. Goodnight."

"Government don't make a mistake," mused Wain, rising. "That's all I ask. Goodnight, and much obliged." He strode from the room, past the deputy who stood waiting at the doorway, one eye on the Diamond Four man, the other on the riders who sat in their saddles in the street of Lingo. Wain puzzled his head over the midnight questioning; was Hildebrand merely seeking further evidence, perhaps grilling both him and Hurd separately, hoping one would incriminate the other? Possibly he thought one or the other might try to escape, and then bring his swift arrest. Wain smiled at that; he would not try to escape. Charley Arnott, Nafe Bittick, Dish Dishawn, Tommy Hueber and Old Man Lea met him at the hitch rack, allowed him to offer his own explanation.

"Questioned me, that's all. If it ever comes up that the marshal knows about the meeting that instructed us to order the surveyors out, you'll know it didn't come from me. I refused to say who, if anyone, sent us."

There were sullen mutterings over Hildebrand's action. Not one among them but knew Wain Adams was the last man in the world to shoot a person in the dark, in bed, asleep. "If they arrest yuh, Wainey, they'll shoot a dozen of the leading citizens of the county before they get yuh behind the bars," grunted Dish Dishawn.

"No, it'll come out all right," insisted the little cowman.

WAIN ADAMS wondered why Handsome Hurd had not been present the night before with the riders who had fol-

lowed him to the marshal's office from the Box A. He put it down to Hurd's guilty conscience since the Ticote man had hinted of Wain's culpability to Hildebrand. Hurd must be seen about that left-handed slap, without delay. The Diamond Four owner was saddling to have it out with the big blond when another explanation came to him of Hurd's absence from the group in front of the marshal's office. It smote Wain deeply, rousing emotions that he had hitherto been unconscious of. One of Arnott's riders, Fat Stevens, a solemn-looking skeleton, skinniest man on the range, came over to the Diamond Four with a "mess" of three wild turkeys, asked for Wain, and said:

"Gosh, after you-all left with that marshal last night, includin' Charley, Handsome Hurd comes back to the house and asts Mistress Arnott if he cain't set with Miss Judy fer a little spell!"

His gloomy countenance held a wry turn which Wain did not note. "What did Mistress Maggie say?" the little cowman asked, frowning slightly.

"Oh, she let them visit and chat fer quite some time, spite of how late it was, Wainey."

"You're lying, Fat!" spat out the young cattleman, with a vehemence that made the other stare. Then the puncher laughed.

"Reckon I am, sense yuh called me. Me, I was on the gal'ry, and drifted in, sensin' the women folks was half-third scairt at Handsome comin' back there that time o' night. They was polite, 'specially Judy, not wantin' to offend him, but told him the other boys that went off with the marshal might need him and it was too late for visitin'. Had to knock him down, almost, him not takin' a hint, in spite of they wantin' to be courteous, he bein' one of Charley's high cyards in the pendin' range trouble."

Wain dropped the latigo, eased off the uncinched saddle listlessly, and walked aside; he strode back and forth for an hour in the ranch yard, thinking it over. His conclusion was that he must talk to Judy, seriously, about Hurd. But in the meantime even this must not deter his meeting with the Ticote chief over Hildebrand's revelation. He heaved up the saddle again, cinched it, and rode to Lingo, to learn why Hurd had cast suspicion of the Derrick murder on him.

"Big Ticote boy is lookin' for you, Wainey," informed Dish Dishawn, before the Silver King saloon.

"And I'm looking for him."

CHAPTER VIII

The Friendly Enemy

WAIN accepted Dishawn's invitation to go in the Silver King; they had several drinks. Hurd was not there, nor were any of his followers. "Likely over in the Montana," commented the Old YT owner, and they started out, to cross the street. On the sidewalk a fat, pudgy hand was laid on Wain's shoulder; the cowman turned, to see Barry Berg of the Lingo bank.

"I vould like to speak vith you, Vain, right away!" The banker's flabby features registered an ingratiating smile.

"In a hurry, eh?" Wain's eyes contracted.

"It vill only take a minute."

The little cattleman left Dishawn with a word and followed Berg two doors up to the bank. After leading Wain into his private office and closing the door, the banker turned his protruding, pale eyes on the young ranchman.

"I am very sorry, Vain, but ve have carried your fader's notes to May seventeent. And now he has transferred the proberty to you, vich makes the segurity a—a—doudful." Berg rubbed his fat hands.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Wain, holding in check his anger. "The mortgage is on the stock, and the stock hasn't changed hands. You know that."

"Vell, vell, ve must call in the notes." Berg's bulging eyes shifted. "It isn't altogedder the transfer that makes the pank doudful, it is that odder matter, vid the marshal. You know vat!"

The cowman knew, and he knew that Berg knew, through a leak somewhere in the affairs of the marshal's office. Or perhaps it was too much to expect the loyal cattlemen to keep the questioning secret. He sat silent, let Berg tell what he knew.

"There vould be big exbenses in a trial if the government goes through vid it.

And the pank has invormation that the madder vill be pushed! Den the nesters vill be here in the fall!"

"And you'd foreclose on the notes, force us to sell the Diamond Four, and leave us with a horse and saddle each to ride out of Caracara Valley, when you might get every cent and save us too by renewing, as customary, through the next calving season? Berg, Handsome Hurd's been talking to you!"

"So-ho! No, no, Vain, you have been misinvormed! It iss the government that is pushing this case."

"And you've got advance information from the government?"

Berg stroked his stubby hands. "I have been told that you vill be arrested for murder, vich vill endanger the pank's segurity. Ve vould like to do vat ve can, Vain, but the brotection of the odder people's money is a necessity."

"Do yore damndest, Berg!" Wain Adams rose deliberately and strode from the office, into the street. There was no minimizing the seriousness of the situation, financially. Wain wondered if Charley Arnott, too, might be pressed by the bank, though that was unlikely. Arnott was "in" as deeply as the Diamond Four, and in addition the Box A owner had advanced Harvey Adams a thousand dollars on a personal note. Of course there was no menace of an arrest facing Arnott. This feature of the situation caused Wain more immediate concern than the money. Berg seemed certain that Wain Adams would have to face trial for murder.

But Wain had come to town to see Handsome Hurd. He started to cross the street, toward the Montana, and encountered Tommy Hueber.

"Gosh, you look mad," grinned the puncher.

"Do I?" Wain had sent Tommy, the day before, to the east foothills of the Midnights to see a man named Tipton, only eyewitness to the shooting of his brother two years previously in West River, and Tommy had just returned. "What did Tipton say, and will he come over?"

"Nary either. I seen his widow."

"Widow?" asked Wain quickly. "You mean Tipton's dead?"

"Good as daid. He's skipped, left the old woman rustle fer herself. She looks like she deserved it—I'd hate to chore around under her wicked eye. Tipton's in Colton, she opined."

WAIN looked at his watch. "Next mail stage goes in an hour. Come along." He led the way into Harry Bangor's store, bought some writing paper and wrote a hasty letter to Alex Tipton, addressed it Colton, and took it into the postoffice. Tipton must be brought to Lingo to look at Hurd and Paint Mustain at the earliest possible moment.

Leaving the postoffice they went to the Montana, looked in. Hurd was not there. As they came out, Pinky Teague and Gandara passed them, going in, nodding curtly. "There's two hombres I want to see, Tommy. I'll ride out with you later." Wain went back in again, followed the pair to the far end of the bar.

"Have a drink." Pinky Teague, two-thirds drunk, spoke.

"Not now. Come here." The little man drew them to an unoccupied card table. "Where's Hurd?"

Gandara gestured across the street. "In the Maverick."

"Why's he want to see me?"

"Yo'll have to ask him," snickered Teague. "It ain't no trouble—or we'd stuck around."

"Gandara," shot out the little cowman, suddenly, boring into the mahogany-hued Latin's lustrous dark eyes, "who killed Derrick?"

Gandara's expression did not change as he stared intently at the diminutive range man who had shot his gun from his fingers on their first acquaintance. "The señor is trying to—to joke?" he asked, mouth opening slowly into a cruel smile.

Wain turned to the squat bandy-legged puncher. "The same question goes to you, Pinky Teague. Answer it!" The words sobered the man, whose lips twisted as he answered:

"You've been drinkin', Adams!"

"That's all." Wain left the table, hurried out, satisfied that if Handsome Hurd knew the murderer, these two henchmen were not in on the secret. He crossed to the Maverick. Handsome Hurd and Pain Mustain were chatting with Pete Slavitik, the one-eyed proprietor. Wain walked over toward them, slowly.

"You looking for me, Hurd?"

"Why, yes." The huge blond turned about languidly. "I hear you've been around looking for me the last half hour, too, *Mister* Adams." He moved back slowly, to the first of the rows of booths. "Come in here, and we can talk confidential." Paint Mustain was at the Ticote chief's heels. Wain went as far as the door of the little room.

"I don't reckon we want to have any confidential chats, *Mister* Hurd. Yes, I was looking for you—to ask you why you told Hildebrand *I* might have killed Derrick!"

"Hm-m!" The pupils of Hurd's light eyes dilated. "Hildebrand said that, did he?"

"Not carrying tales about what Hildebrand said! Did you—and why?"

"Shucks, you're skittish, Mister Adams. Reckon the only way I can make friends with you is to stay away from the Box A." Handsome Hurd laughed easily.

"Don't bring the name of any woman into this again, Hurd!" The little man was standing in the doorway, in easy attitude, facing the giant cowman and his splotch-faced foreman, within the room.

"That's an invitation, or a threat?"

"Both."

Hurd frowned. "So Hildebrand says I accused you, eh? Well, what if I did?"

"If you did, you lied." Wain Adams' words were evenly spaced. "I'll tell you something, Hurd. Somebody else knows a lot more about the Derrick case than I do, savvy?"

"Who?"

"A pair of gunmen by the names of Hurd and Mustain." The sentence was uttered with a quiet emphasis that held the Ticote men in fascinated daze. Hurd's green-hued eyes went to the little cowman's holstered gun. Mustain shifted his gaze to his chief, then back at the figure in the doorway.

Hurd shrugged. "Why?"

"Because you wouldn't throw suspicion on an innocent man if you wasn't afraid. *And yore alibi is too danged perfect.*"

PETE SLAVITIK brushed past Wain. "Gents, if there's goin' to be trouble, I reckon yuh better go outside." Handsome Hurd motioned him aside. "Ain't goin' to be trouble, Pete. She's as peaceful as a Sunday school meetin'." He turned to the Diamond Four cowman. "Why else do we know a lot about the Derrick killing?" he asked, softly.

"There was a similarity in the way Derrick died, and the way Bill Adams, my brother, died."

Hurd's eyes held their focus on the younger man for a long minute. Then he spoke. "You have to prove that, Adams. I wasn't there."

"I'm going to find out."

"Then you'll know. While you're finding out, get some facts about the Derrick insinuation, too."

"I will. And when I do, somebody's going to answer to me."

Handsome Hurd made a sour face. "Turning detective—helping the government, eh, Adams? Reckon the cattlemen will find you over in their camp before this thing gets through with."

"You're a rotten guesser, Hurd."

"Am I? I'll tell you something. If you wasn't so damned bullheaded and uppish, Adams, you might know yore friends. Maybe Hildebrand told me that you said I killed Derrick. Sabe? To draw us both out, and play one against the other. Tell you something else. You know why I was looking for you today? I've got a check for eight thousand dollars in my pocket, made out in yore favor, to extend the loan at the bank to me, on a transfer, and save yore Diamond Four. That's what I wanted to see you for, Mister Adams!"

Wain was not slow-witted, but he did not understand what the Ticote man was talking about until Hurd repeated it. Then he thought he had not heard aright. "You mean to say you are willing to advance me a loan, knowing Berg is pressing me?"

"Right. Or, if you're squeamish about taking it, I'll use my influence with Barry to renew. It's only a neighboring act, Wain, and I happen to have the means."

"Thanks, Mister Hurd, the Diamond Four will stand on its own legs!" Wain Adams turned from the doorway, stepped through the barroom quickly, and out into the street, his gaze blankly ahead, unseeing. He neglected to look up Tommy Hueber for the ride home, but instead mounted his horse at the hitch rack, still in a daze, and rode toward the Box A. "A friendly enemy," he mused, as he jogged slowly ahead. "Or is he?

Maybe Jes LaRue was wrong when he said Hurd would lay low and never forgive till he got the man that called his bluff."

He wondered what he would say to Judy Arnott.

Was Hurd right, after all, in assuming that Hildebrand was playing a double game, telling each of them that the other had hinted at his guilt, in order to get one or the other to "squeal"? Wain debated that and the other question: Why had Hurd offered to help the Diamond Four?

Had he been able to see and hear what was going on in the Maverick he would not have credited Hurd with a shade of doubt. Paint Mustain, on Wain's departure, turned amused eyes on his chief.

"What's the play?"

"I got to make him *think* I'm his friend, at least till fall. That's why I got Barry to threaten to foreclose. Barry won't, because we'll get the Diamond Four, best acreage on the creek, cheaper after the nesters come than now. I ain't worrying about the West River ruckus, because Alex Tipton is out of the way. If Hildebrand moves before then, it'll be jake and force the Diamond Four into our hands, but the government moves so damned slow, I haven't got any hopes for that."

"Yo're shootin' clean around a corner, Handsome!"

"I am, poco plenty. I don't aim to spoil the cut on the whole herd, either, by singling out the Diamond Four. There are others we'll need, when the time comes, including the Box A, as Barry said this morning!"

CHAPTER IX

The "Sooners"

As Wain Adams left the bosque trail along the creek and neared the clusters of weathered buildings of the Box A he had not yet solved the riddle of the conduct of Handsome Hurd. In spite of the Good Samaritan pose of the blond cowman, however, he was skeptical of the man's intentions. It was true that he might even be mistaken about the West River affair, some other trio of gunmen might have slain Bill Adams than three of the four Ticote men. The only real tangible clew he had was the description of two of the gunmen given by Alex Tipton immediately after the slayers had disappeared; one a big light-haired stranger, who had fired the shot; one with a birthmark; one a Mexican. There were other big light-haired individuals, others with birthmarked faces, other Mexicans.

But one thing Wain knew; Hurd had shown himself to be both treacherous and merciless since his arrival on Caracara range, and he was not the kind of man Judy Arnott would want to marry.

Judy, up to recently, had never appeared even pretty to Wain, all the time he had known her, ridden with her, attended fairs, dances and barbecues with her; she was like a boy, in her ready laugh, her tanned cheeks, straight, boyish figure. But of late how different she had seemed! And since Handsome Hurd's entry into the situation, the whole world took on a strange new coloring to the little cowman when he thought of Judy, which was more often than he dared himself admit.

Wain found her now saddling her favorite buckskin, and was thankful she was alone. They talked of commonplace things, while Wain thought of Handsome Hurd's act in staying behind at the ranch to see Arnott's daughter the night before. Then:

"I'd be kind of careful, Miss Judy, about letting that man Hurd get friendly," he said awkwardly.

"Why so?" she asked quickly, smiling.

"He's not exactly the kind of man to be friendly with a girl like you, Miss Judy."

"Oh, he was here in the afternoon, yesterday, and was real civil and polite. He knows a lot of interesting things and country, Wain."

"I don't doubt it; he calling on you yesterday?"

"He just rode up; wanted me to shoot plover with him, but I couldn't spare the time, for helping mother."

Wain's face was sober. "Yore mother didn't want you to go, did she?"

Judy laughed. "She didn't say a word—how do all these little things concern you, Wain?"

"You know, Miss Judy, Hurd's killed a man."

"It was a fair and square fight, wasn't it, with that Frenchman, LaRue?"

Wain's jaw clicked and his lips tightened, checking the words that would have told about the sheepherder boy. He had no absolute proof that Hurd had done that shooting; besides, he loathed the rôle of attacking a man who was not present to defend himself.

"I reckon you're right, Miss Judy, and I won't say another word against Hurd. But I don't want you to be friendly, that's all, for yore own sake. Hurd's too old to be paying attention to a girl yore age, too, Miss Judy."

"Oh, he didn't come to see me, alone, I'm sure but he had business with dad, too. Brought news that the government was going to open alternate sections east of the new town, as well as Caracara Valley proper. That will make it harder for us to fight, with population coming in all around."

Wain nodded slowly. He had heard mention of that rumor in town. "The outlook is none too cheerful, Judy," he said. "Railroads get the alternate sections as a gift, and the nesters will make their land valuable; we have railroad money to fight, in Washington."

"It seems sacrilege, the coming of the trains, the cutting up of the range. I didn't go down to see the first pilot engine. Did you, Wain?"

"No, Judy! I'm staying away from Providence." Afar to eastward Wain had been a silent witness from his own domain as the army of railroad construction workers welded their bands of steel into the kingdom of the cattlemen. A few others had ridden miles to see the grade cut and filled over the low lomas and gravelly washes, but Wain had stayed away. The days that had seen the skyline dotted with the construction camps within sight of the rolling hills of the Diamond Four had been depressing days. The first smoke of the first freight engine that pushed supplies into Providence had drawn few of the cowmen. Most of them had been silent and grim witnesses, like Wain, hating the thing that was spelling the doom of the free government range. As the Diamond Four owner turned to mount, the girl touched his arm.

"You're worried about something, Wain?" she said.

"Do I look worried? The railroad, I reckon, and—"

"It's more than that, and the nester trouble, isn't it, Wain? It isn't the Derrick matter, is it?—you know they'd never dare arrest an innocent man for that!" Her eyes snapped.

"No, I don't guess I'm losing a minute's sleep over that, Miss Judy." This was not the literal truth; only the threat of a murder trial had prevented Wain from saying much more to Judy Arnott than he had allowed himself to confess.

"It isn't anything else, money matters, or something the Box A might help in; you know father owes the Diamond Four everything."

"It's sure good of you to be interested, Miss Judy. No, I don't reckon there's a thing you-all could do."

He swung up and rode away, a picture in his mind of the loveliest creature he had ever seen, one suddenly enshrined, haloed, deified. "She's an angel, Judy is," he murmured, sick at heart that he had not been able to speak his thoughts. That was the month of May and the coming months were to draw him still closer to Charley Arnott's daughter, but without speaking the words he hungered to say, for the menace of a trial for murder was not removed.

Slowly indeed the government was working, but Wain learned in several ways that his movements were being watched, his every move checked by Marshal Hildebrand and his deputies.

One other thing troubled him, filled him with uncertainty. Barry Berg changed his mind and renewed the notes for six months. Wain thought of Hurd's promise, and exacted from the banker the assurance that Hurd had no hand in the renewal. But after the transaction he wondered.

SPRING passed, and the summer came and went, with its torrid heat on the sandy wastes and arroyos of Caracara Valley, where in the memory of Harvey Adams the grama and tobosa grass had grown stirrup high as far as the eye could see. It was a dry summer, of hot winds and baking terrain, for once nature's fine equilibrium had been overthrown in denuding the range by overgrazing, the conservation of moisture by the grass roots was but a memory; sea-

sons of erosion had swept the native meadowland into barren wastes, gales had blown away the silt, exposing gravel and coarse sand. The summer had found the poorest forage in the recollection of the cowmen, and what remained of the surviving herds from the severe winter, were grazed far back from Lingo, even to the higher slopes of the Midnight mountains.

The hammers and saws continued to build a town on the site of the new Providence; irregular train service brought additional freight supplies, some of which was shorthauled into Lingo, benefiting Harry Bangor and the lesser merchants and the saloonkeepers. But even those, like the team freighters, saw the peril of a new town in the district; their bread and butter was cattle; if the cattle went, they went. Providence and the railroad would benefit; they and the land boomers and the coming nesters.

Charley Arnott had not called a single meeting; there was nothing to do now until the invasion was at hand; through it all rode the shadow of the Derrick murder; like a spectre whose undelivered blow was momentarily expected, it damped the fighting spirit of Charley Arnott; it even seemed to have stilled the caustic tongue of Hurd.

But with the ushering in of dusty and desolate October, with the fateful November and the nesters but a few weeks away, the sullen suppression of months of waiting began to yield to mutterings of savage purpose. Wild suggestions were legion; they took no definite form, but the resolve was adamant that the cattle range must not be surrendered to the nesters.

Handsome Hurd, ensconced down on lower Spanish Creek on the old Clay Shepard Double Spur ranch, said but little, and minded his own business, so far as Wain Adams knew. His trips to the Box A were less frequent, due, Wain believed, to Judy's indifference. Yet he persisted, on occasion, as the Diamond Four owner learned one day in the first week in October when he visited the Box A on a call from Charley Arnott.

"Mister Hurd was over yesterday evenin'," said Arnott. "He says yo're plannin' to close out, account of debt. My loan stands, indefinite, Wain, and I'm sorry I cain't make it more, to tide yuh over. You know how Box A is fixed.

The little cowman's face flushed. "He said that, did he? I'm getting plumb sick of saying he lied."

"Yuh mean there ain't no truth in it?"

"It's false. Hurd and Barry Berg are close. It may be he's heard something from Berg. But the Diamond Four sticks, till the last calf falls. I'm certainly obliged to you, Charley, just the same."

"Morning, Wain!" Judy Arnott burst into the big room, started to retreat. "Oh, you are talking business. I just wanted to say the sooners are coming, Daddy!"

"I was just leavin', Judy," chuckled Arnott, rising. "And who are the sooners?"

SHE puckered her lips, made a face. "They're scamps! I didn't know either till awhile ago, in Lingo, I saw Mr. Hurd—he's been in country where there were land rushes before. Sooners are the scamps and rascals, friends of the government agents, officials and army men they come and stake out their claims in advance, taking the cream of the land before the others get there! Some of them are arriving in Providence already. There will be a hundred sooners on the land the morning of entry. The other nesters will take what is left!"

"Doggone thieves!" grunted Arnott, and trudged out into the yard. Wain's face hardened; it was like the politicians and boomers who were robbing the cattlemen of their land to play false even to their own kind. Judy came close to him.

"Are you leaving Wain?"

"Did Hurd tell you that, too?"

"He—" She checked herself. "It isn't because of what Hildebrand is doing, is it, Wain?"

Wain stiffened. "What is Hildebrand doing?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, maybe I'm violating a confidence." Her wide eyes grew earnest. "But there are two government men watching every move you make, day and night, at the Diamond Four, in town, everywhere! It is an outrage! You are not planning to leave, are you, Wain?"

Her earnestness smote the cowman; for a week he had struggled with himself, whether to speak to Judy of what was uppermost in his heart, whether, after

this length of time the menace of the Derrick case were not removed from him. Now it was coming up again, more invidious than ever.

"No, Miss Judy, I'm not leaving." His tone was stiffly polite. "You see, for one thing, I owe yore dad money, and Diamond Four always pays its debts. You'll excuse me, because I've got a mite of chores to 'tend to." He bowed, and hurried out, took the saddle, and rode at a stiff gate for Lingo, bent on seeing Barry Berg.

CHAPTER X

Cavalry

HALF way into town the Diamond Four owner ran squarely into Handsome Hurd. The Ticote chief was headed for the Box A; he drew up with a twisted smile on his bow lips.

"Howdy, Adams. You're sober today?" The reference was to the fact that Wain had taken several drinks the evening before with Dish Dishawn in the Maverick, while Hurd had looked on sullenly, uninvited.

"I'm always sober, Hurd." Wain's jaw squared. "I didn't count on running into you so soon; there's a question I want to ask you, Hurd—"

"Shoot away." The big man shrugged. "I was just riding over to tell Charley the latest—nesters camped on the roundup trail, east of the Midnights already!" He gestured east and north. "Opening's more than a month off. Thought they'd come by train. Most of 'em will, of course. These are Oklahomans and Missourians, mostly, bringing their teams and stock with 'em to get a start over the train bunch. Don't know, most of 'em, that this opening is by law of grab and squat. There'll be a deadline, and they won't cross till the signal's given. That is, except the sooners!"

There was much news in what Hurd had said, but the details of the surprise arrival of the vanguard of the homesteaders Wain would get in town. He had something else on his mind, voiced it in cool, incisive tones:

"Why are you telling folks I am leaving the Caracara, Hurd?"

The other frowned. "Selling Diamond Four, ain't you? I was only mentioning what I heard at the bank, from Barry Berg."

"From Berg?" snapped the little cowman, angrily. "He said that, did he? I'll tell you something, Hurd. Diamond Four is able to handle its own business, without any announcements from either you or Berg. Understand?"

"No offense." Hurd shrugged. "Only person I mentioned it to was Charley; I'll tell him what you said." He made to move off.

"No need. I've nailed that lie already and am able to handle my own affairs. Lay off Diamond Four in future, Hurd, and you'll save trouble."

"Trouble, eh?" The Ticote man's eyes glinted.

"Trouble."

"Gun trouble?" Hurd glanced at the little man's holster.

"Maybe."

"I'm left-handed, slow and clumsy, as LaRue could testify if he was here!" He grinned. "You being a pistol fighter wouldn't hurt a little feller like me, that's tried his damndest to be yore friend, would you, Adams?"

"I'll pick my friends."

"Sure." Handsome Hurd turned his mount. "Well, adiós, I'll ride ahead and tell Charley the nester news, that he's more interested in than you, Mister Adams!"

"Arnott's not at the Box A, he just rode west, to see Bittick," informed Wain, shortly."

"Oh, well, reckon I'll ride on and leave word, with Miss Judy. Adiós!"

The effront was deliberate. Wain had refrained from challenging Hurd's statement about the presence of Hildebrand's men shadowing him, to save embarrassment to Judy for repeating it. Now he tensed slightly, flung out cool words:

"I don't reckon yore presence is welcomed by Miss Arnott, Hurd!"

The Ticote man showed even white teeth. "No?"

"No!"

"Why?"

"She don't cotton to yore kind."

Hurd bent forward. "Listen, Adams! Maybe I think as much of that lady as you do, savvy? As for not being welcome, I reckon it's up to the lady to tell

me that, not you! That's right, ain't it?"

"Right!" bit out the little man. "But watch what you do and say in her presence, Hurd!"

"I reckon she's a slick-ear till you got yore brand on her, Mister Adams!" Hurd wheeled swiftly and tore through the greasewood. Wain sat tense, clutching the bridle rein with trembling fingers. Hurd had balked him; to have denied his right to visit the Box A without some word from Judy justifying it, would have been to presume too much on the woman's prerogative. A moment later Wain Adams was racing into Lingo.

HE went directly to the bank, found Barry Berg in his office.

"What's this tale you're telling, Berg, about Diamond Four quitting the range?" he demanded, hotly.

"I didn't know I vas," asserted the popeyed banker. "Except I vill admit I mentioned to vun man only dot you vould brobably sell."

"Why?" The word was explosive.

"Vell, the notes are due on the seventeent of next mont'. Ve can't be exbected to carry them through anodder vinter, vit the drout' and all!"

"You'll collect?" Wain's eyes narrowed. "Well, even so, what's that got to do with me selling?"

"Vell, if ve take the stock there von't be nobody else finance you to buy more cows, vit the nesters coming, and the vinter facing, so I gongluded you vould sell."

"And you told Hurd I'd sell on yore own rotten guess?"

"Meester Hurd—I vill tell you now—Meester Hurd vas the vun who interceded to have the notes extended six mont', and—"

"You lied to me last spring, about Hurd having anything to do with it, did you?"

"It was merely a pizness segret, then, Meester Adams. I was exblaining why I mentioned it to Meester Hurd. Don't get excited, Vain. I t'ought I vould offer to puy the land holdings, myself!"

Wain smiled wryly. "For how much?" he asked, merely for information.

"Vell, ve might pay five t'ousand, for the land."

"And again you mightn't. No, Berg, the Diamond Four's not for sale. And I'd advise you to keep your mouth shut, foreclose when the time comes, and let me attend to my own business." The little cowman rose quickly. Berg raised a pudgy hand.

"Vait! The government, aggording to invormation received by the pank, is going to move at last in the Derrick case. If you should be arrested, and dried, Vain, you vould have a hard time to find a burchaser of the land at the brice I offer, under the gonditions. Dot's all." He wagged his head, flopped back in his chair.

Wain, boiling inwardly, disdaining a reply, left the banker and reached the street. A sandstorm was clouding the long thoroughfare of Lingo with dust. Wain went to the postoffice, and waited; he wanted to find out from Hildebrand about the shadowing rumors, about the threatened arrest. He spoke to the postmaster, a rheumatic, cross-eyed individual named Yeager, who chatted volubly about the nesters camped on the northeastern foothills. "Wiggy Wilson's gone over to see 'em," Yeager rattled on, "and when he gets back there'll be a peck of news!"

Wain went out again into the duststorm. A pair of riders galloped down the street, from the direction of the cluster of adobes dignified by the name of "Old Town." Charley Arnott and Nafe Bittick turned over to the postoffice, seeing Wain, and dismounted. Arnott's face was dark.

"Nafe got a letter from Clay Shepard, over to West River, and me and him jest took a pasear around Providence. It's like you've been contendin', Wain, we cain't fight 'em now, if we wanted to—there's a troop of cavalry on the way. Some of 'em has drawed a line from east of the Midnights clean to the Reservation—won't let them overland nesters get through till the signal's given. The soldiers is sidin' with the nesters."

"Cavalry, eh?"

"Yeah, ready to enforce the law of squat—first on the ground has the first filin' rights. The danged liars! A dude named Freed, secretary to Senator Farren, is already in Providence with a bunch of his friends, acrost the cavalry line!"

"They the sooners they're talking about?"

"Thieves and buzzards, ready to swoop down and take the pick, while them other pore devils comes and gets what's left—raw desert, mostly, sand and cactus. Thieves stealin' from thieves. And the army's back of 'em, and us cold-decked both ways." Charley Arnott's eyes filmed over. "Wainey boy, our range is good as gone; we cain't fight Uncle Sam's soldiers. Every outfit on the Caracara is busted, ruined, right this minute!"

"Hell, we got to fight 'em, Charley!" It was Nafe Bittick who spoke. "Fight 'em becose we lose, anyhow, if we don't. Lestwise, we got to fight the nesters, every man, woman and child of 'em, for the sake of our own blood and kin!"

WAIN ADAMS was silent, his face grim and serious. He left the two cattlemen, went back to the postoffice, waited in vain for Hildebrand. Rumors of the soldiers' arrival and plans were everywhere; before sundown a dozen of them entered Providence, west boundary of the land opening. Wain heard they were establishing the line there. He did not ride over to the new townsite, but jogged slowly home, the matter of Hildebrand's surveillance unsolved. He would see about it later.

Harvey Adams, propped up in his high-backed chair, listened to Wain's recital of the troop news, swore lustily, and called for resistance, if the last of the cowmen died in the rebellion. "Are yuh goin' to bed down and let the nesters come in without liftin' a finger?" he demanded. "Are yuh plannin' to go bust, in deeper debt, or to abandon the old Diamond Four and move yore handful of unmortgaged yearlin's and calves into the Arizona desert or Chihuahua? Fight 'em! It'll rouse the attention of the nation, start an investigation. Our women and children will get their rights, anyway, if we die fightin'!"

Wain could offer no counter argument satisfactory even to himself. But he kept a stiff upper lip. On one thing he was resolved. Berg, Hildebrand and Hurd would not force the Diamond Four into premature insolvency without a personal accounting to him. "The debts will be paid," he said, doggedly. He made no mention of Berg's latest ultimatum, nor of the rumored moves of Hildebrand. Time enough for Harvey Adams to worry about those things when the crisis arrived.

Next evening at dusk Charley Arnott jogged up the Diamond Four trail, through the bosque-lined *cañoncita* of the creek and into the old *parada* grounds. "I ain't called a meeting," he told Wain Adams, "because of the marshal's spies, but calculated on seein' our own men personally. What's yore idee of what's to be done?"

Wain was forced to admit he had no program; he had lost sleep trying to find a way out.

"That's what every man says I seen, except Nafe and Dish, that's clamorin' for nester blood, without no object that'll save the range. But Wiggy Wilson come in from Lingo this mornin' with this here note. Read it."

Wain took the half-sheet of stationery, scanned the brief message:

> **Mr. Arnott: I want to marry your daughter, but I'm man enough to make my play and render my service *first*, then ask her consent and yours afterwards. Please ask her to tell you what I said to her in town this morning.**
>
> HURD.

Wain handed back the paper unspeaking, his eyes lifting past the cowman to the far horizon, without betraying the question that Arnott expected.

"You know what he told Judy?" queried the Box A man.

"No."

"He told her to tell me that the cattle outfits didn't need to worry about the homesteaders or the troops; that he's been through this kind of thing before. Said that he'd guarantee that the last nester would be drove out of Caracara Valley, and all he asks is that him and Paint Mustain and Teague and Gandara be given free hand to act, when the time comes."

WAIN ADAMS pondered the message for a long time, then: "I don't reckon I'd trust the fate of Caracara Valley to a new man like Hurd, or to any one man, Mister Arnott."

The other looked puzzled. A smile came to his lips. "You don't take that position, Wain, because of any personal reason, do you? Mayhap you guess what I mean?

"No, I hope I'm big enough, little as I am, to act fair."

They moved in the half-darkness, toward the house. Arnott clutched the younger man's arm. "Somebody's skulkin' back of the hoss shed," he whispered. As Wain turned, a jab of light and a report of a pistol marked the point of danger. His hat flopped out and to the ground.

The two men separated, guns in hand, gave pursuit on two sides of the shed. They hunted for half an hour, without finding a trace of the would-be assassin. Ranch hands joined, with lanterns, and rode a two-mile circuit, without result. Bare-headed, Wain returned, picked up his bullet-punctured hat. In a post of a corral fence they found the leaden missile.

"A thirty-eight—danged funny," mused Arnott. "Nary a hand on the range uses them, that I ever heard of. He shore must 'a' tried to pot you, Wain, because yo're a head shorter'n me, and he couldn't 'a' made a mistake."

The Diamond Four men did not recall to Charley Arnott that a thirty-eight calibre bullet had slain his brother bill.

CHAPTER XI

Before the Nester Came

A HECTIC two weeks passed swiftly, with the trains of overland wagons, horses, cows, sheep, pigs, even chickens, moving up to the deadline beyond Providence. Wain had told no one of the shot in the dark, had asked Charley Arnott to keep it secret, for reasons of his own. He gave up the notion of seeing Hildebrand, then; if the marshals agents should be conducting that kind of "investigation" he would await results. Wain did not believe even Henry Derrick, brother of the slain surveyor, would try to shoot a suspect under cover that way. The mystery of the thirty-eight remained unsolved, though Wain knew that some of the marshal's men might be more apt to use that calibre weapon than the men of the range, not excepting Handsome Hurd.

No further word had been exchanged with Barry Berg of the bank, and nothing that Arnott had said indicated that the Box A was to suffer the same fate as the Diamond Four with regard to the notes. Wain knew, in spite of Berg's professions to the contrary, that the bank was carrying the notes in its own interest; the only hope of ultimate collection on the decimated cattle was the meagre chance of better days.

The fall round-up had been as bitter as the worst had predicted; the beef cut was almost nil; gaunted steers were taken by the cattle buyers at $15 a head; the calf crop had been a third of its normal fourth. Riders were discharged and needed upkeep was curtailed. Somehow the cattlemen had continued to worry along; they at least could eat their own beef.

On the fifteenth of November the government range would be open to entry. On the seventeenth the notes of the Diamond Four would fall due.

A feeling of quiet desperation prevailed on the range. Handsome Hurd's mysterious assurance to Arnott that the homesteaders would never take the cattlemen's grazing ground had a peculiar effect. Arnott had carried the word around to his trusted neighbors, as far as the Lazy K on Upper Spanish Creek. They wanted details, but there were none. Yet the very secrecy of the plan of the Ticote cowman had a reassuring effect. As the first of the November arrived Arnott summoned a trusted dozen of the leading powers on the range, for a conference at the Box A. Handsome Hurd was invited, but arrived late, which gave them an opportunity to discuss Hurd's offer among themselves.

"Wain Adams is agin it," explained Arnott. "Maybe he'll state his reasons."

"No, I haven't any reasons I'm laying before you—without proof. Except that no man or set of men should be entrusted with a thing like this without the interests involved knowing the program."

"What suggestion you got to offer?" asked "Hide" Burman of the Lazy K, pointedly.

"None."

Charley Arnott spoke. "It was the Derrick killin' that stayed our hand. I reckon there ain't a man here that wouldn't rather die defendin' the home he built than see hisself starved out and driven away by the boomers and speculators. Some of us hails from Texas, back twenty or forty years, and we know

the hist'ry of the hundred odd men that died fightin' Santa Anna's two thousand in the Alamo. If it hadn't been for the Derrick killin', that's died down now, we'd—"

Handsome Hurd arrived. To Arnott's questions he was evasive. "Depends on what the nesters do. There's two courses open. We'll get 'em either way. And the Derrick case ain't ended—it's just getting to the point where an arrest will be made, likely before the nesters come." He looked at Wain Adams, who met his gaze with steady, even calm until the big man's light eyes shifted.

"This don't go down, Hurd," grunted Dish Dishawn. "I'm of the same mind as Wain—we want to know."

Handsome Hurd shrugged, turned away. "Have it yore own style," he said. "I'll be tickled to drop it, I ain't got as much to gain as the rest of you. We'll call it off here and now, if you say the word."

THAT had a quieting effect, even on Dishawn, though it did not change Wain. But the others voiced their confidence in Handsome Hurd's experience and courage to handle the nester peril. Wain Adams left the Box A with a grim resolve. He looked up Hildebrand forthwith.

"I'm tired hearing the talk that's going the rounds about a warrant, spies shadowing me, and the rest of it. Did one of yore men fire that shot at me a couple of weeks ago, Hildebrand?"

"No," answered the marshal, quietly. "Someone shoot at you?"

"With a thirty-eight gun. I'd like to know something, marshal. When Derrick's body was examined in West River was a bullet taken from it—a thirty-eight?"

The marshal puffed tranquilly at his cigar. "If there was, does it mean anything to *you?*"

"It might. A lot."

"And if there was, and you suspected the fact, it might bring the speedy arrest of a certain individual."

"Who?"

"The man that wondered if it was a thirty-eight!"

"Meaning?"

"You." Hildebrand yawned. "I'm not telling what I know, Adams."

The little cowman bent forward. "I'll make you a proposition, Hildebrand. If you're planning to take me, hold off three months longer, and if Derrick was killed with a thirty-eight I'll either bring you the slayer or let you clamp me in jail."

The marshal frowned. "I'll be the judge of when to clamp any man in jail, Adams. But without telling you it was a thirty-eight I'll give you the three months, on the knowledge that you won't leave the Caracara before that time."

It was settled. Although it did not remove the shadow of arrest from Wain—the shadow that more than anything else had prevented his asking the hand of Judy Arnott—the little cowman felt a sense of relief, and grimly set about to solve the mystery.

He did not know what way to turn, but he talked to Harry Bangor, who shipped Derrick's body; he gave more than a week to night excursions to the quarters of Handsome Hurd, Paint Mustain, Pinky Teague and Gandara. He learned little or nothing, and almost forgot his quest the feverish excitement of the swift approaching entry date.

The afternoon of the fourteenth arrived, with the further invasion of the cavalrymen, the sooners, the government men, suveyors, clerks, engineers, agronomists and officials, who teemed about the new Mansion House of Providence; with the horde of overland homesteaders beating at the gates of the soldier-guarded deadline on the plains and foothills from the Midnights to the Indian Reservation. The next day was to hear the bugle call from the troops that would send the mob into Caracara Valley. Wain rode over to the Box A and asked Judy Arnott if she would go with him in the morning to see the first train of the main nester army into Providence.

There was a final gathering of the cattlemen at the Arnott ranch-house; no plan of action offered better than to leave the fate of the range in the hands of Handsome Hurd and his lieutenants of the Double Spur.

Every man and woman of them, and children, would be on hand to see the rush in the morning. Judy was glad Wain asked her to ride with him, she said.

"Why do you dislike Mr. Hurd so?" she asked, as he stood with her at the gallery step after the departure of the

Ticote cattleman. "Has he done anything very wrong?"

HIS eyes met hers for a long moment. "I can't answer that, Miss Judy." He turned to go. Fat Stevens rounded the corral fence, crossed the yard, dismounted. "Got a letter for yuh, Wainey. Brung it from the post-office, knowin' you'd be here." He tossed it over. The cowman tore the envelope, postmarked Las Vegas, read:

> Dear mr. Adams, yes i seen youer Brother bill die but i aint coming there to Pick out no suspecks, not me—i am keeping the fifty dolars Transpertation to send to the old woman, she needs it—now i will hand you a tip mr Adams. them discriptions sounds likely, does the big un always wear a coat and left hand holdster, if so try him out and see if he dont shoot a little thirty eight with his righ hand, but see he don't kill you if he does because thats the Racket that tuk bills life—now you tare this letter up mr. Adams.
>
> Yours,
> ALEX TIPTON.

Wain's face clouded swiftly with the reading; he went through it a second time, pocketed the note in silence. "It isn't bad news, is it?" asked the girl at his side, noting the hard glint that had come into his eyes. Twilight was mellowing the range.

"No, not bad news," he said, slowly. "Good news."

To his vision came the picture of the description of his brother's slayer given by one who had talked with Tipton—a great tawny, cat-like man who moved with the swift suppleness of a girl and who crouched like a panther when he faced a foe.

"Oh, Wain, what is the matter? You don't look as though it were good news! It's nothing that will interfere with our ride in the morning, to see the nesters come, and to see how Mr. Hurd plans to protect Caracara range from the invaders, is it?" Her eyes were full of wonder.

Wain's jaw set. "I'm afraid it is," he answered grimly. "I'll have to deny myself the pleasure of yore company, Miss Judy, because there's going to be things happen that a woman shouldn't see." A vision came again of a panther-man facing him with hidden guns.

CHAPTER XII

A Promise Given

ONLY the certainty that Handsome Hurd was the same big blond gunman who had slain his brother under dubious circumstances at West River would have induced Wain Adams to deny himself the pleasure of Judy's company on the morning of the great spectacle of the land rush. Alex Tipton's letter in itself was not absolutely conclusive, since the man might be of doubtful veracity; but taken with other evidence there was no uncertainty in the mind of the little cattleman of the Diamond Four.

For one thing, Alex Tipton's letter explained for the first time the mystery of the .38 calibre bullet that took Bill's life, the same unusual type of gun in the range country that had fired on Wain from behind the Diamond Four horse sheds—the same weapon, Wain believed, that had taken the life of U. S. Land Surveyor Derrick. Of the latter of course Wain had no evidence, other than the strange reactions shown by Marshal Hildebrand when questioned about the gun.

Handsome Hurd, as Tipton recalled, always wore a coat; and now this queer habit stood explained on other grounds than those of vanity. The Ticote gunman was wearing that useless garment even on days of torrid heat for a purpose—to conceal the shoulder holster that held the deadly little .38, probably one of the flat, small, black automatics that were new to the range. Then, while he posed as a left-handed pistol-fighter, with his big scuffed holster and its frontier forty-five Colt swung low at his left side, Hurd was able to maintain deceptive unpreparedness with the hand an antagonist watched, while, with the speed of thought, his right hand did deadly execution with the hidden weapon. This was Wain Adams' theory.

True enough, he reflected, Handsome Hurd had slain Jes LaRue, a notorious man with guns, by using his Colt forty-five, and with his left hand, indicating

that he was as adept with that member as with its twin. Or— He stopped in his tracks in the Box A yard where he had turned from Judy and was walking toward his horse; his eyes fixed themselves on the ground, unseeing, in utter amazement. Could Jes LaRue have paid the penalty of his life through ignorance of that same trick?

Wain recalled swiftly now how startlingly invisible was the motion that took the life of LaRue; how, with his forty-five tossed to the ground, Hurd had darted down, swept up the gun. At the time it seemed to Wain that Hurd had fired almost before he seized his fallen gun.

Now it drove home to the Diamond Four man that the "big panther," from the position of his right side, *could* have killed the Frenchman with a hidden gun, sheathed his forty-five and claimed victory in a fair fight. Not only could he have done it, but Wain was certain now such was the explanation for the unbelievable speed of the act. Thus, Hurd had been armed even in the saddle, while his victim had trusted his chances to an unscrupulous opponent.

Judy Arnott had stood at the gallery steps, surprised and shocked at the change in the manner of Wain Adams on reading the letter of Tipton. Only five minutes before, he had invited her to ride with him to Providence in the morning to see the nester invasion; then he had as suddenly canceled the invitation on the ground that a woman should not see what was to happen. Now she roused herself, came toward the cowman.

"Oh, what has happened?" she asked impulsively. "It has nothing to do with Mr.—Hurd—has it, Wain? He, too, asked me to go with him in the morning—and if you cannot go with me, I was just thinking I would have to ride with him."

He swung sharply about on his heels, faced her. "Don't you dare do that—don't you dare!"

"Why not?" she gasped.

HIS eyes blazed. "Because I've got to prove something about him; I've got to see him use his guns, try to kill. I'd do it tonight, but it's got to be in daylight—*and it can't be done in the presence of a woman, Judy!*"

"For heaven's sake!" She laughed unnaturally. "Have you lost your senses, Wain?"

"No, ma'am, I haven't," he said, coldly. "You asked me awhile ago why I disliked the man, and I couldn't answer. I didn't know, ninety-nine per cent, and all I need is to make him furnish the final proof. He killed my brother, Miss Judy!"

A tall, erect figure strode from the bunkhouse doorway. Charley Arnott revealed he had caught the last sentence. "You speakin' of Mister Hurd, Wain?"

The little cowman nodded grimly, hand rising to the saddlehorn.

"And you've got circumstantial evidence, ninety-nine per cent, that he shot Bill? Don't you reckon if Hildebrand had acted on ninety-nine per cent circumstantial evidence, he'd have me and you both jailed, before now, Wain, son?"

Wain's face hardened. "It's more than ninety-nine per cent. I'm sure of it, Charley, and all I need is to make him prove it, himself."

"Yo're not goin' to start a ruckus, now, before the land openin'—when the whole range is dependin' on him to save the Caracara from the nesters?" Arnott frowned.

"*I'm* not depending on him, Charley."

"Listen to me, Wain." Arnott laid his hand on his diminutive daughter's shoulder. "Even admittin' that Hurd was the one—I don't want to hurt yore feelin's, you know that, Wain, but even you'll admit that Bill was a ringtail, with guns. Not sayin' he was a bit wild; a drinker, or anything against a good man's character but Bill was known for what he was—a pistol fighter—whever he went. And when a man's unbeatable with guns, they's shore pop goin' to be another un come along some day that's a fraction faster'n he is. Ain't that right?"

WITHOUT waiting for reply, considering his argument irrefutably final, Charley Arnott hustled off across the ranch yard and into the house—possibly, Wain thought, to allow the two young people to resume their interrupted twilight conversation. But the Diamond Four owner was in no mood for further visiting that he felt would have brought nothing but more recriminations against his rival; now he was determined that actions, not words, should work out the

drama in which he was the leading actor. He swung up to the saddle.

"After what I've said, are you going to let Hurd take you to the land opening, Miss Judy?" he asked, as a parting question.

"If you do not come, yes," she said, quietly, stepping back. "It may prevent trouble."

"You'd do that—after I asked you not to? You'd keep me from finding out what I've got to know?"

"Yes, if it will prevent a fight, maybe worse—just at a time when cattlemen should stand united instead of divided in the face of our enemies."

His lips tightened, openly jerkily. "Very well, I'll have it out with Hurd the minute you leave him. Goodbye!" He wheeled, touched spurs and galloped toward the Diamond Four trail in the dusk of evening.

He had gone past the cottonwoods beyond the lower corrals when he heard a racing horse behind him; he drew into a slower gait and stopped when he realized Judy was pursuing him on the horse left saddled by the skeleton cowboy, Fat Stevens.

"I couldn't let you go, this way!" she said, pleadingly. "There's something I've got to say to you. You cannot fight Mr. Hurd with guns!"

"Why?" he demanded stiffly. "Are you so concerned about *him?*"

"Oh, maybe it's you I am thinking of, Wain." She had sprung lightly down to tighten the cinches of Stevens' heavy stock saddle. At the words Wain was beside her, in the near-darkness. "Judy girl, we've been friends—we'll always be friends, won't we, and when I've cleared myself of the Derrick matter."

"You'll always be daddy's friend, won't you, Wain?"

"Of course; there's nothing Charley Arnott could ask, scarcely, that Diamond Four won't owe him, and you, Miss Judy the two best friends that any man ever had." He wanted to seize her, there in the darkness, proclaim his innermost thoughts, but did not, to save her the pain of an uncertain future. Her words froze him.

"Then you'll let your grudge against Mr. Hurd ride; you'll not fight him, before he can help us out of this trouble. I oughtn't to tell it, Wain, but Box A owes more to Mr. Hurd than you know. Daddy would have been forced off the range this summer but for him. He's been good, loaned us money, saved us at the bank. If you drive him away and turn the other cattlemen against him, you'll drive the Box A into ruin, too, Wain."

Her soft voice, her whole being, were pleading, and Wain Adam's temples throbbed and his finger muscles hardened into two swollen fists. "And Charley Arnott never even asked Diamond Four to pay what we owed, when he was in that fix," he said, reprovingly. "And now he's got himself in the power of this Ticote chief—"

"What do you mean by that?" she broke in quickly.

"Not anything I've got the proof of, I reckon. Was that money advanced to yore dad on notes, if you don't mind answering, Miss Judy? Time notes?"

"No, he knew there was no security; he merely deposited the money at the bank and took dad's I O U."

Wain was silent; he knew now how Hurd had placed Arnott, leader of the cattlemen, in his power more than if he he had given him money on a six-months' or year due note. If anything happened to Hurd, if he were arrested or shot, or driven from the range, the money would be due without notice. He did not explain all of this to Judy.

"You'd rather ride with me in the morning than with Hurd?" he asked her, in sudden decision.

"Of course I would, Wain!"

He smiled, in the starlight. A mocker sang in the sage. "Then I'll be over, and we'll see what kind of a play the Ticote bunch makes when the nesters cross the range."

CHAPTER XIII

The Invaders

TROOPERS rode the line north and south to Providence, back of the railroad right-of-way and as far as the eye could see to the Midnight Mountains. East of the line were the alternate railroad and government sections, the latter withheld for future settlement; west, for a hundred miles, stretched the Elysium of home-

stead empire—once the grazing Eden of the great Caracara valley and the home of forty thousand head of cattle.

Through the heart of the sixty-mile-wide basin crawled the silt-laden waters of Spanish Creek, on whose low banks north and south were the seven thousand acres of deeded land that was the sole patented grazing wealth of the cattlemen —the holdings of the Diamond Four, Box A, Old YT, Double Spur, Seven Bar X, Lazy K and the smaller outfits to the west. Their fences, from the Midnights to the bluffs of the Maplais badlands and the Reservation, lay cut and scattered where the forces of the government had severed them. Wain Adams and Judy Arnott, up at daylight, rode down the wagon road along Spanish creek from the Box A toward Lingo.

Wain was quiet and thoughtful; he had slept but little, thinking of the big blond Ticote chief, his hidden gun, and the execution it had done, if all the evidence was correct. There still remained the mere trace of a doubt, for Tipton's word was not unassailable; only in one way could Wain make Hurd convict himself—by forcing him to make his deadly play and use the hidden .38. But that was out of the question now, until a showdown would not destroy Wain's best friend, Charley Arnott. Judy, filled with feminine curiosity, chatted about Hurd and his secret program to frustrate the nesters.

"Two hours more," the Diamond Four man murmured gloomily, "and Caracara valley sees the beginning of a war, if Hurd and his gunmen try what I'm afraid they will, terrorism and assasination, a worse war for us than the drouth and the northers we've fought in the past. The government can't be handled like sheepherders. The bugle blows at 10 o'clock." He gestured toward the eastern skyline, tranquil in the glow of the morning sun. Myriads of gray dots and clouds of dust in the distance seemed unreal.

"If there's a war the invaders will be responsible." Her tone was bitter. "And there was a horde in the bosque last night, after you left, ready to pitch their tents on the choicest of the homestead riverland above us and the Old YT. Why didn't you men think of that, and stop *them*, anyway?"

Wain smiled grimly. "That crowd of sooners are the friends, cousins and brothers of the biggest politicians of the east—we'd brought down the wrath of the authorities quicker by interfering with them than by shooting down a hundred of suckers behind the line. Not that they don't deserve it. It's a matter of fighting this thing *right*—to win in the end."

"But how? If you have a plan, better than Hurd's—"

"I haven't—now. But I'm counting on the cards." The little man's blunt jaw tightened.

"One of the sooners had the nerve to come to the cook and try to buy a quarter of beef. Pots started to whet his butcher knife, and the rascal, dressed like an actor and in a shiny top hat, rode off in a hurry. We'd better inspect their quarters in the next few days; they'll likely steal their meat."

"If they do, I don't reckon they'll have sense enough to bury the hides."

They had reached the outskirts of Lingo. They were not alone on the road; buckboards, rigs and saddle horses churned the dust behind and in front, for many miles, into the wide street of Lingo and beyond. Charley Arnott was somewhere ahead, had left early to join Hurd at the Double Spur. When man and girl went through town they found the place deserted except for the uneven caravan and the few like Harry Bangor of the general store, who lingered to handle business passing through. Wain and Judy continued on toward the new townsite.

IT was 9:30 when they walked their mounts into the mushroom city, with its huge warehouse and store, its multiple boxhouse hotel, its cheap depot, frame branch bank, barber shop, two pool halls and five saloons, which had supplied themselves with any barrels of liquor via the first freight trains, to enter. The depot was a scene of indescribable confusion, with wagons, topped and open, hacks, carts, buggies two and three-seated democrat wagons covered with black oilcloth, canvas-topped prairie schooners, wide-wheeled and springless, ox teams, mule teams, horses, leather-springed coaches even carriages, burros, farm animals fuming and fretting men and women, some afoot, some astride horses and saddle-mules, all congregated

at the rope that had been stretched along the west side of the station.

"They laid that line so's the station would be on the outside," remarked Wain. "So the crowds will still be on the outside when the trains come in."

"My, what a mob—must be a thousand people right here, and they're scattered all up the line, as far as the mountain—you can see the wagons." Judy raised a rounded arm.

"Not one in ten will get a claim. Looks like the ones here expect to meet friends or relations on the train. Hello, there's Nafe Bittick."

Nafe had seen them, and rode over. He had been on the scene early, with Judy's father and Handsome Hurd, who were now down by the depot, where Wain caught sight of the Ticote man a moment after he saw Bittick. The little cowman's eyes hardened; he noted Hurd's gray linsey coat with a new significance.

"First train's late—there's three trains," said Nafe. "They didn't haul 'em any farther'n West River last night—to make it easier to patrol the line this mornin'."

"Train late," mused Wain. "That gives the sooners a bigger margin than ever."

Bittick laughed. "It ain't that bad, Wain. They don't need any more margin than they got. Trains all come in together, due any minute. Listen!" The distant blast of a whistle reached them. Cheers split the air at the depot.

Charley Arnott and Handsome Hurd came over soon after. Wain had noted the absence of Paint Mustain, Pinky Teague and Gandara; he saw them a moment later emerging from one of the new saloons. Hurd was playing a lone hand with Arnott, Bittick and the others, keeping his men in the background. A real curiosity seized the Diamond Four owner; it would be interesting to watch how the Ticote man was to make good on his promise to save the range from the army of nesters about to rush the lines.

Hurd grinned broadly at sight of the little cowman and Judy Arnott paired in the saddle, facing the nester line. Wain met his gaze with a curious look of calm appraisal, from stirrup to Stetson, and his eyes studied the stiff linsey coat, an all-season garment for that climate, held about the big panther frame with a single button. Hurd turned his mount back toward Dish Dishawn, who was approaching.

Judy gave Wain a searching look. Her woman's intuition had told her Hurd was hostile when he had come up. "Don't let him pick a quarrel, Wain," she whispered. She laughed a bit uneasily. "You know, he wanted me to come with him. Said he'd explain the whole workings."

Wain returned her smile, glad of her high regard. The Ticote man turned again, with Dishawn; approached the little group as Arnott moved over beside Judy. Hurd looked at the Diamond Four man, grinned in affected friendliness.

"Let's move up closer, and look at the sheep," he said brusquely.

"View's good from here," returned Wain, shortly. The whistle of the first train pierced through from the near lomas.

"C'mon over," insisted Arnott, "and hear their lingo." He stepped his bronco forward.

RELUCTANTLY Wain moved up with Judy; they joined the ranch crowd, who had bunched themselves, several hundred strong, on the inside of the line. It was a solemn, bitter-faced lot of range folk, for the most part. Opposite Wain and Judy a bustling, red-cheeked woman in gingham and sunbonnet was wielding a dust-rag over the provisions chest in the tail of a wagon, a chest that had served as baking-board, kitchen and table for a trip of several hundred miles. "My lands!" she was fretting, as she worked. "This here kentry mought be the land of milk and honey that Bingo Goodman tells about, but it's the dirtiest land that God ever made, and no mistake. I never seed the beat. Now, back in Haversack, they warn't no grit, an' sand, an' alkyli, to git in your mouth every bite o' grub you eat!"

She had been talking for the benefit of the thin-faced woman of the next outfit, and suddenly she looked up to espy Judy Adams.

"My lands! A real cowgirl, and such a pretty lady, too!" The other woman, peaked and harassed-looking, turned tired eyes toward the object of the energetic one's remarks. A small face, crowned with real curls of light gold, thrust itself through the wagon sheet, blue eyes feasting on Judy's buckskin,

her caparison and attire. The little miss tumbled out of the wagon, sat shyly on the tongue, smiled at the cowgirl.

The red-cheeked woman bustled over to the rope. "I wonder, Miss, could ye tell how fer away is this here homestead land?"

"You'll find it quite a space, ma'am—beyond where the sooners will be when you get there."

The woman looked puzzled. A gangling figure in high mud-incrusted boots and faded blue jeans came around from the back of the wagon, a linch-pin in his greasy fingers, suspicion in his keen squinting eyes. "Better not talk to them cow folks, Lucy," he grunted. "They won't tell you nothin', but throw you off the track!"

The train whistled nearer and shriller. A hairy giant lunged up with a clattering span of harness-laden horses, bellowing at the excited throng in his way, sent the golden-haired girl flying from the wagon tongue, while the tired-eyed woman whined to the tot to get out of daddy's way. The red-cheeked woman next gestured wildly to her gaunt, bony spouse. "My lands, Ab! And you with a wheel off, a-greasin', and the bugle'll be blowin' and us not even hitched. Jake Meiggs and Lizzy will beat us to the openin' yit, and us a-racin' fer weeks!" She pointed to the outfit containing the golden-haired girl, and ran back to toss up the harness on the dust-sniffing horses of the Ab McKim menage.

There was a commotion up the line. Wain Adams and Judy drew back. A cavalryman's sharp command sounded down the line, and Wain saw a man running out into the open sage, on the prohibited side.

"He's running the deadline—" A pistol barked over the din of voices. A hush followed; the trooper had fired over the man's head. Another shot, and the line-runner went a step, hopped on one leg, and staggered down. "Winged him," murmured Handsome Hurd, over Wain's shoulder. "Trains rolling in, sure's you're born!"

With a screeching of the whistle and a steady clanging of the engine bell, the first special rumbled over the level stretch to the depot. In the distance the long black streak of the second curved the rolling hills. Before the brakes of the first had fairly locked, men were hurling out packs of bedding and grub; they followed, sprawling, scrambling out with more baggage. The steps and vestibules disgorged a maddened, frenzied multitude.

IT was a scene long to be remembered by both Wain and Judy—men in the apparel of frontiersmen, middle west farmers, city dandies, southern planters, long-coated preachers—or were they gamblers?—pale-faced, hollow-chested persons with burning eyes, tired old men, swaggering youths, heavily-laden Germans, soldiers, empty-handed and square-jawed pugilists, long-haired artists or evangelists, some paired off and carrying poles that lifted their baggage on two sets of shoulders, a few women who tramped after their men-folks, some with eager-eyed children—all clambering forward toward the already jammed depot grounds. Above their din sounded cries of drivers, "hack!" "stage!" "hack!" "stage!" the shouts of the boomers and locaters to the members of their individual parties; the warning commands of the line patrol: "Stay back of the rope! Stay back of the rope!" he shouted to the frenzied and swirling mob.

The ringing bell of the second train, immediately behind, added to the din, and the scene was repeated, farther back from the line. The third train was moving up slowly.

"There's Clay Shepard!" Wain pointed him out to Judy, as he pushed through the crowd from the second train. Clay, former owner of the Double Spur, had come on from West River, where he had been looking into things for the cattlemen. He showed a pass to a man in uniform, went under the rope near where Wain and Judy were sitting their horses. He saw them, strode up. "Worse'n cattle car I ever loaded at West River." He removed the big Stetson, mopped his perspiring face. "Where's Barry Berg, Miss Judy?"

"I saw him down the line a bit." Handsome Hurd edged his mount in beside that of Judy, leaned down low to Shepard to hear something that he affected to believe was confidential. Shepard spoke to the three.

"A lot of scamps and jail-birds in that mob, as well as the suckers. Taken all in all, I'm glad yuh bought the Double Spur, Handsome! Miss Judy, there's

even a bride on that train I come on."

"A bride," said the cowgirl, dryly. "I pity the poor thing."

"Yeah—that is, rumors on the train said her and her young lunger friend was to be married first off when they located their claim. That's them comin' now!" His long finger went toward a young woman of striking comeliness, who carried a heavy tarpaulin bag in each hand, beside a lean, white-faced youth with deep-set, brilliant eyes, who bore a lighter burden in a sack over his shoulder. They pushed as near the rope as the jam would permit, looked about them in bewildered fashion.

"Looks like the bride was the man of that party," commented Wain, with a laugh. "Where's the preacher that's to marry them?"

"He was on the train—goin' to homestead like the rest of 'em," said Shepard. "Looks like a lunger, too. We better move out of here, or we'll git trampled on, when the rush starts."

"I'd like to see 'em try to trample down my horse." Judy Arnott's eyes snapped, as she watched the third train disgorge. "What time is it?" Her words were no more than uttered, when, with startling unexpectedness in the midst of the milling, confused mass of humanity, five minutes before the depot clock indicated ten, the bugle of a trooper sounded.

CHAPTER XIV

Ann and William

ANOTHER bugle and another, to north and south, throbbed on the ears of the waiting cattlemen above the piercing, maniacal yell of the mob. The ropes fell to the ground, and Wain and Judy found themselves in the center of a completely disorganized army streaking west, on foot, on horseback, muleback, in conveyances of every description. The yell died as suddenly as uttered; for the rush was on, and all energy was bent now on reaching the promised land; the bark of sandwich men from the eating houses, hired hack runners, and the locators, summoning their caravan clients forward, chiefly broke the stillness. The stream poured through and round about the mounted range folk. The ground about the Diamond Four owner and Judy Arnott, who managed in some way to stay together, was littered with abandoned baggage—time to hunt up unnecessary impedimenta after the land was found!

Through the fog of powdery dust Wain heard the shrill protests of the red-cheeked woman and the mutterings of the hairy giant in the wagon adjoining. "It's a outrage! A cheat! Never tellin' us to hitch up, even. And the clock was set back a-purpose! Yes, Lizzie, I'm a-goin' to write to Congress about it, and the President!" The father of the golden-haired girl was thwacking his team forward. Someone was sounding a futile gong triangle from the Providence Hotel. Wain looked back, amused at the desert cross-streets of Providence. Judy called out. "Look, Wain; oh, look!" She was laughing, and Wain smiled as two men from the roof of the nearest saloon dropped a thirty-foot sign, painted on white canvas; "Free Whiskey To-Day!"

Handsome Hurd cut through the procession. "That's a slick racket—same trick they pulled over in Oklahoma. Friends of some of the nesters paying for the whiskey today to thin out competition. Lots of thirsty ones that locate good claims will be back for that whiskey and forget to hog-tie their land. Somebody else will take the cream. Doggone if there ain't that bride and groom, looking like they lost their mamma!" He gestured toward the last of the foot stragglers.

Wain and Judy turned, centered their attention on the strange couple. At that moment the red-cheeked woman screamed; up the line, the wheel of her neighbor's wagon dropped off; big Jake Meiggs had been too hasty replacing the linch-pin. Lucy McKim was loyal, declared she wouldn't go a step without waiting for Lizzy Meiggs, Jake and little Daisy. Wain grinned, turned again toward the tardy "bride and groom."

Judy exchanged glances with her companion. "If they move that fast, they won't even get a patch of Malpais lava bluffs!" She appraised the nester couple, particularly the woman.

"Awful pretty girl," murmured Handsome Hurd. He shot Judy a smile. "Looks like there were going to be two beauties around the Caracara after to-

day, Miss Judy!"

The cowgirl affected not to hear; Wain's face darkened. "Bride and groom" were looking toward the Box A girl rider and the young cowman whose horse paired hers. The nester girl said something to her timid companion, and started forward with her two heavy tarp bags, the man following.

"Damn me if they don't aim to adopt us!" chuckled the Ticote cattleman. "Quit yore ogling the lady, cowboy!" He grinned at Wain Adams, whose eyes contracted swiftly.

The young woman came up; she avoided the big blond, gave Judy Arnott an eager look as though to speak. Something in the cowgirl's manner chilled her, and she turned to Wain Adams.

She was not timid, not even apologetic. "We seem to have lost our locator, to whom we paid a fee to select a good claim for us," she said, simply, looking up to the man in the saddle. "I have a map." She let her two bundles fall, fished into one of them. "I wonder if you could tell me where this one-hundred-and-sixty is." She rose, with a neat, pen-sketched drawing on white paper.

"Yes," assented the groom-to-be. "We are complete strangers here."

WAIN suppressed a smile. Handsome Hurd rocked in the saddle, exchanged glances with Judy.

"What's yore name?" demanded Hurd, while Wain examined the drawing.

"Crabtree—William Crabtree."

"Bill, eh? So yore name's Bill?" The Ticote man showed large even teeth, thrust his hands downward and hitched at his formidable-looking cartridge belt. "A nester by the name of Bill!"

"No, sir. William." The homesteader coughed a bit.

Hurd bared his strikingly fine teeth again, turned and looked at Judy, who was not smiling now, but was studying the waiting nester girl at near quarters, flaxen-haired, strikingly handsome as to feature and build, a young woman who looked as though she had had to rely upon herself in the struggle for existence in a city, and had not failed. She might have been an office woman, a secretary or stenographer. Wain had been scanning the paper for some seconds. Judy stirred uneasily, reached over as though to take the paper from Wain's hand to hurry an answer, when Charley Arnott, in the center of a group down the line, waved to her.

"Oh Judy! Come here — somebody you know!"

The Box A girl touched her buckskin pony quickly and was gone. Wain handed down the map.

"Sorry I can't help you any," he said politely. "Folks on the range here don't know anything about those surveys." He spoke the truth; he had studied the township range lines, the numbered sections and the one with a 16 in it and a check-mark in the upper left-hand square, the quarter-section that this young couple sought. Curiosity partly prompted him; he wondered how far back the land might be platted. Yet while he was in no mood to aid these invaders of the cattlemen's historic range, he observed the courtesy due a woman.

"Let's see that layout, lady!" Handsome Hurd leaned from the saddle. "I've been in land rushes before." She glanced at him, hesitated, then extended the paper. The cowman squinted at it for some time, and suddenly his face brightened up.

"That quarter-section lies over there." He gestured northwest. "Follow the river road till you come to a little bosque—"

"Bosky? What is that?" queried William Crabtree.

"Woods—trees—cottonwoods, sabe?"

"Cotton-woods?" The youth's sunken eyes gleamed bewilderment.

"Yeah—poplar trees. Then turn off across the lomas till you strike the big butte, and—"

"I don't quite understand — lomas, buttes."

"Where did you learn to ride, mister?"

"Ride?"

"Yeah, ride a horse!"

"But I don't ride a horse, sir, I—"

"Don't yuh? What the hell you doing in this man's country, then? Dry up, I'm talking to the lady! Go to the little bunch of trees along the creek, ma'am." He smiled his best. "Follow over the rolling hills to the big hunk of dirt sticking up high—that's the butte—and yore claim's right there, somewheres!"

The nester girl's blue eyes held suspicion in them. "But this land is level,

near the river, and will be irrigated," she said, somewhat haughtily.

"Ann is right, under the first diversion dam!" put in William.

"What diversion dam?" Hurd's eyes shot with avid interest. "What do you mean—diversion dam?"

"I—don't exactly know—"

"I'm afraid we are losing valuable time," said Ann. She turned to Wain. "Is this man trying to mislead us?"

WAIN winced. "I don't know, ma'am. Reckon you'd better find yore locator. What's his name?"

"Bingo Goodman."

"You pay in advance?"

"A hundred dollars."

"You'll likely never see that hundred again. Better turn back, you two—there's going to be trouble on this range. You'll save yoreselves grief." Wain turned to ride away. He heard the girl's firm "Never!" Handsome Hurd's stirrup brushed his.

"Let's you and me salute the bride!" The half whisper shot from the big blond's bow mouth, which held a distorted grin.

Wain Adams checked his mount, stared at the Ticote chief.

"Come on; she's spoiling for a real cowboy welcome; that danged lunger ain't fit to own a filly like her." He yanked his bronco around. "Watch me!"

The Diamond Four man turned in amazement. The girl and her companion were standing alone, as though undecided whether to go on or return to inquire about their claim at the deserted hotel back of the depot. A hundred feet away Ab McKim and Jake Meiggs had got the shunted wagonbed raised, ready for the wheel. Handsome Hurd spurted up beside the honeymooners-to-be, his figure swaying easily in the saddle.

While Judy and Charley Arnott sat their horses in the group of riders near the depot, Wain, believing the Ticote cowman must be joking, saw him draw his bronco to its haunches before the nester girl and William Crabtree and swing his big frame of supple muscle to the ground.

There were words that the Diamond Four man did not hear, then—

He saw Handsome Hurd straighten, jerk his immense head back from a resounding slap in the face, while Ann's arm went out a second time. Her tenderfoot companion jumped toward the cowman, sputtering indignant words, arms cutting circles. Hurd stopped him with his fist, toppling him. The girl ran to William, who sat up, blinking, suddenly rose again and sprang forward. With one heavy foot on the writhing nester's stomach, Hurd reached out and with cat-like agility seized the blazing-eyed girl.

"My lands!" Red-cheeked Lucy McKim raised her ginghams and trotted through the dust. Wain Adams sank the spurs. Hurd was pulling at a fighting, scratching girl, drawing her to him.

Wain slid his horse to stiffened forelegs in the dust. "Stop it, Hurd! Where's yore manners?"

The big blonde released the "bride," whirled, tensed. The avid eyes filmed swiftly over. He backed away, his unwinking gaze on the Diamond Four man's holster and gun hand.

Hurd droned softly taunting words. "How'd *you* come to horn in on this, Adams?" His glance shifted to Judy; he raised his voice. "You siding with a she-nester, Wainey boy?"

The little cowman left the saddle. "She's a woman, Hurd. Fork yore horse. And get out!"

William Crabtree had scrambled to his feet, his cadaverous eyes wild. He strode belligerently toward the big cowman. "This fellow," he gasped, appealing to the Arnott party, "insulted my—my friend and me. If it wasn't for this c-cowboy, he'd have—"

Handsome Hurd brushed him aside, his gaze still fixed on the Diamond Four man. "I'm not accustomed to being spoken to just that way, Mister Adams!" he hummed, slowly. "I didn't reckon it would put you on the prod, my telling these nesters to make tracks, and go back where they came from." His bow mouth opened over flashing teeth, his eyes shot with a gleam of triumph, switching to Judy Arnott. "Reckon we folks aren't welcome in the company of nesters. The blond's made a new catch—and that lunger better watch his maiden."

THE little man did not alter his gaze, did not reply. He was watching the stiff gray linsey coat, his thoughts on what was under it. He regretted deeply

he had given Judy his promise not to carry a quarrel to the Ticote chief while the fate of the range was in the hands of Hurd. What, by the way, was Hurd doing to stay the nesters? Hurd swaggered toward Judy, confident his backhanded stab regarding the nester girl had gone home. "Reckon you'll reconsider those kind orders for me to get out, Mister Adams!"

"Fork yore horse, Hurd, and ride!" Wain bit out the words incisively.

"And if I don't?" Hurd sneered. His light eyes gleamed weirdly with the wolf stare of the gunman. "Do you reckon you can run another blazer on Ticote Hurd like you did in the Montana?"

The defiance was unmistakable. Judy Arnott glided to the ground. Wain heard her low whisper: "Your promise! You wouldn't break your pledge to me, over a nester girl, would you, Wain?"

The Diamond Four man did not turn; he knew, with a pang of pain, that his tense immobility must be taken by Judy as an affront; he heard her little boots stamp angrily away in the dust. Then he saw Hurd's hands move slowly and deliberately—too slowly for him to draw—and Hurd had flung belt, holster and gun to the ground.

Wain's lip curled. "Now yore coat, Mister Hurd!"

The Ticote chief showed his teeth, turned the stiff gray garment from him with a quick movement, was stooped again in the attitude of the panther man.

Wain did not know as his own fingers swept to his belt that Handsome Hurd had been studying him for many weeks, inquiring, observing, until he had learned that the little Diamond Four owner was a stranger to gun duelling in spite of the pure accident draw in the Montana; but Wain did know that Hurd had dropped his coat and stood in gray shirt sleeves, vestless, without revealing a hidden weapon or shoulder holster.

CHAPTER XV

An Unexpected Teammate

WAIN ADAMS tossed his belt, holster and gun into the dust. In the brief instant since Handsome Hurd had indulged his pet form of challenege by pitching his weapon groundward—in this case holster and all, differently from when he had slain Jes LaRue—Wain had been assailed with regret, due to the presence of Judy and the promise he had given her. Then Hurd, at his insistence, had removed the coat that Wain felt sure would reveal a hidden .38 in a shoulder holster, and when no second weapon was exposed, the Diamond Four man was filled with doubt. Had Alex Tipton been wrong about the .38? Was Hurd, after all, the assassin of Wain's brother Bill, and was the guess about Surveyor Derrick's manner of death, with a small-caliber gun, wrong also? The little cowman's brain worked swiftly in the short interval. As for Wain's promise to Judy, the Ticote man had picked this quarrel, thrown down the gage of battle. There was no backing out now, and Wain did not want a second truce.

It was certain that, even if Hurd had, on occasion, used a secret weapon, he was thoroughly confident of his ability with his left hand and the big forty-five. As Wain's filled holster struck the dust—almost before it ceased motion, Handsome Hurd's panther frame was darting forward and down toward his own. And Hurd had the advantage, in that his reach was greater. The guns were within a few inches of the same distance from their owners—Wain had seen to it that he did not fall short, opening himself to any charge of unfairness; he had, in fact, lengthened the space a trifle. After all, he must trust largely to the same luck that was with him in the Montana saloon.

He had anticipated the rush of Hurd, leaped in unison with him. His eyes were on the gun in its sheath on the ground, his wiry little figure bounding, fingers reaching, knowing they must whip the pistol from its scabbard, cock it, and fire at the menace ahead. He did not see the grayish object that had bounded in the path of Hurd, the travel-stained tarpaulin bundle that had left the hands of Ann, the nester girl. His fingers seized the wooden butt of his gun, yanked it; his thumb cocked it, and his eyes raised on the instant for the mark. By a hair he withheld the pressure of his forefinger on the trigger as he saw the big blond sprawling over the baggage pack.

Wain's knees straightened, and his gun muzzle went down. Chagrin at the shameful—to him—act of the strange

girl held him. Handsome Hurd was rising, eyes afire with rage; his hands were empty.

"You've got a friend—you've got a teammate, Adams!" hissed the big man, tauntingly, and his hand swept toward the grim-faced Ann. He broke into a bitter laugh.

Wain's face was tense. "If you're not crippled, Hurd, from this fall, name yore own conditions." He went a step forward, bent on reaching the Ticote chief's gun and handing it to him. As he neared, while Hurd stood motionless, observing, Wain's gaze caught the slanting hammer of the gun in the holster. Quickly, Hurd stooped, swept up the leather.

"What'll it be?" demanded Wain, sharply. "But next time we play that game mine will be cocked, too." He realized fully now how the blond gunman had counted, accurately, on the fall of the holtser protecting the full cock of his six-shooter when he had dropped it to the ground.

HURD'S thumb had eased back the hammer. "If yore pretty she-nester partner will stay out of this we'll step off five paces." He grinned amusedly. "Uncocked guns in view of the audience." He laid down his pistol, tossed aside holster and belt, stepped back the five paces, turned.

"No more of this!" shot out Charley Arnott. "C'mon, before somebody gets hurt!"

"My lands, yes! It's scandalous—" The red-cheeked Mrs. McKim stared, as Wain stepped swiftly back, laid down his gun at twenty feet from the other.

"His legs is shorter—it ain't fair play!" growled the giant bearded homesteader, Jake Meiggs. Nobody had thought of that. Nafe Bittick was striding forward. "I'll make the mark!" He stepped off the point from Hurds' gun, scraped a line in the dust with his high-heeled boot; he repeated the act at the other end of the open space, and the crowd scurried back.

Wain stood in place, watching Bittick, at one side of center. Bittick raised his own six-shooter. "When I fire's yore signal—" His gun belched skyward.

"Hey, the little feller ought to have a handicap!" But they were leaping, heedless of Meiggs. Wain, conscious of his disadvantage at that distance, against Hurd's long strides and reach, and stinging with the memory of the nester-girl's unwarranted interference, had measured the distance. He did not run, as Hurd was doing, but jumped, twice, dipped down at the end of the second jump, swept his gun into his hand as Hurd was reaching, and with only the "feel" and the range to guide him, cocked the weapon and pulled the trigger close to the ground in one thumb and finger movement. His eyes saw Hurd's long arm darting, clutching; saw that it snatched puffy dust, at the tail end of a whizzing little funnel of sand whose farthest trail ten feet behind the Ticote man held a spinning black object. It came to rest—Handsome Hurd's big forty-five—on the hard background.

"Ki-yi-yippy!" Old Man Lea was tearing into Hurd. "Reckon that'll hold yuh, Ticote! He could 'a' drilled yuh plumb center!" He snapped up the beaten man's gun. "Dang me, if he didn't sink his lead into the handle. Now, Mister Hurd, yo'll have a sooviner worth totin'!"

"Reckon we better ride," remarked Charley Arnott dryly. "And you two can shake hands. What was all this ruckus about, anyhow?"

Hurd affected a satisfied grin. "I give him the lead, knowing he was a runt." He buckled on his belt, took the gun from Old Man Lea, sheathed it, pulled on his coat, and strode to his horse. Arnott and Bittick had taken to their saddles. Wain slowly adjusted his cartridge belt and holster, while Murch Lea droned in his ear. "The finest bit of shootin' I ever see—if that was plumb accident, yo're the dangest accident kid that ever was on the Caracara!"

"That was no accident, Murch." Wain was serious. "I know something *now*. I'm a gun-fighter."

"I ain't denyin' a thing—you was a shot all along, Wainey, the way you drilled lobos, bobcats and diamond-backs. You was a nat'ral shot, on'y yuh didn't know it. Hello, ain't them folks waitin'?"

The range bunch was clattering away—Judy, Bittick, Arnott, Dishawn, Shepard and a few others. Perhaps they expected Wain to follow immediately. He did not. William Crabtree and the nester girl, gathering up their baggage, approached. William spoke: "'Gosh, I

thought for a minute you and that big brute were fighting in earnest! Funny doings, out here in the West. But it wasn't any joke the way that cowboy acted to Ann!"

Wain smiled. Ann did not smile. "You're a gentleman, which is more than most of your kind—around here. I wouldn't have thrown that bundle if I had known you were staging a farce." She turned to her companion; they picked up their baggage and moved toward the wagons of Meiggs and McKim.

CHARLEY ARNOTT and his party had slowed; Arnott was looking as though waiting for Wain and Murch Lea to catch up. Since they were on the upcreek trail, Wain would not aovid them. He noted that Judy was riding beside Handsome Hurd.

As he and Lea jogged steadily on, Wain heard Arnott's words, down wind: "Who's his friend?"

"Name's Ann Franklin," from Hurd. "Clay said so, eh, Clay? Ann and William's the bride and groom—after they get settled in a little nest here in the mesquite." He laughed easily. "That is, if their plans don't go gallavanting." He looked back at the two approaching riders. "Reckon I'll be taking a pasear to Lingo."

"No, we want to see yuh, Handsome. You ain't stopped these nesters, nary a bit, and we're curious to know yore play. Cain't yuh ride out to the Box A—the rest are comin', too."

"Sure—I'll go." Hurd said something to Judy. Wain and Old Man Lea went in among them, through them. "What's yore hurry?" demanded Arnott, increasing his pace. "There's goin' to be a little gatherin'. We'll all perk up!" He swung an arm, broke into a gallop. Wain did not object, but kept the pace with him. Judy had not exchanged a glance with him.

Stragglers were still on the creek road, the Meiggs and McKim outfits behind, many in front. As Wain had passed the wagon containing the golden-haired little girl, he had heard her mother call to her spouse: "That air cowboy is decent; he ain't down on us pore imygrants!"

They passed baggage-laden and empty-handed homeseekers on foot, and their rapid gait soon brought them past the slow-moving ox teams and others of the wagons. Soon they overtook one train of three hooped and covered vehicles, laden with nesters, besides which rode a gaunt, bony individual, in appearance not unlike stage representations of Abraham Lincoln. He was riding a spotted Chickasaw mule, orating in loud, exhorting tones in competition with the rattling wagons. "J. B.," grunted Clay Shepard, "king of the boomers—J. B. Skinner." Wain caught part of his harangue: —"a glorious country, people! We have crossed the Jordan, into the Promised Land, where floweth milk and honey, a land needing only the magic touch of water to transform the desert into the Garden of Allah! I've got you people all placed, every man and woman —on a level hundred and sixty, deep sandy loam, twenty feet of rich soil that will grow anything that God has dedicated to the children of men for their daily sustenance! We are before the walls of Jericho, and they have fallen!" He waved his long arms toward the blazing heavens. "As Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, so it has halted for us—for me—traveling westward by train. You-all follow old J. B., a Moses come to judgment—" The riders passed on, silent, unsmiling. Wain looked toward Judy; she did not see him.

They continued on, at clackened gait. Half an hour later they left the main wagon road and cut off at the bosque trail leading up to the Box A, away from the creek. Soon they reached the open range. The trail wound past a motte of second-growth cottonwoods. Arnott drew up short.

"Second thought, we better hold our little talk right here, instead o' goin' up to the house, where some of the boys is back by now and somethin' *might* leak. The nesters is here. There's only a handful of us, leaders of Caracara valley, and I reckon Mister Hurd can tell us what he plans to do, and if we can render any help." He flipped the reins over his pony's head, dismounted under the mask of the trees.

"I'll go on, daddy," volunteered Miss Judy, and rode toward the Box A home buildings.

"Me, too." Old Man Lea turned his mount. Wain halted him.

"I'd like Murch to stay, if there's no objection," he said, hiding the eagerness with which he made the suggestion.

"Murch is all right." Arnott looked at Hurd. "How we goin' to get rid of these nesters?" he asked bluntly.

The big blond cowman languidly licked a cigarette. "There's a certain gent among us that I'm not telling any plans to," he said slowly. "He's too friendly with nesters!"

"Who?" queried Arnott, frowning.

"Mister Adams."

CHAPTER XVI

Unhealthy Climate

WAIN ADAMS smiled grimly, disdaining reply; it was up to his neighbors to decide whether he was disloyal to the cattlemen's cause. Arnott spoke:

"Wain is one of us. We don't reckon any of us is goin' to let anything personal stand in the way of the fight we got on our hands. Wain stays." He looked from one to the other for approval, received it. "It's yore more, Mister Hurd."

The Ticote man inhaled his cigarette smoke, expelled it slowly. "If I was to say that the Caracara climate was to be made unhealthy for these health-seekers —and others—so unhealthy they'd leave the country, you don't suppose I'd lay my cards on the table now, in the presence of witnesses that might turn against me, do you?"

Charley Arnott's neck reddened. "Meanin' Wain again?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Yes, sir, and no, sir! *I mean every man of you.* This isn't a homecoming barbecue, Mister Arnott, but a war." He thrust his hands into the pockets of his linsey coat, rocked on his heels.

"What the hell you drivin' at?" snapped Dish Dishawn.

"Yeah, we don't savvy yore talk, Mister Hurd," from Arnott.

"Then I'll show my hand. If what I say ever leaks, you can look to some nester friend among us for responsibility. The nesters are here, and we couldn't stop 'em without fighting the U. S. army. But the army'll leave—in another day. That mean anything to you?"

Arnott's face brightened. "You mean then we could herd 'em—and stampede 'em?"

"No, there's the marshall, and he'd call the troops. I mean we've got to work 'em off in little bunches, under cover, make 'em pull stakes and trail, while the rest of the nesters and the marshal sleeps—until the last bunch goes, to a healthier climate, savvy?"

"Yeah," assented Arnott dubiously.

"Sounds like yo're talkin', Hurd," murmured Bittick.

"All right. Now! Who's going to be the goat, if anything happens? Hurd, and Paint Mustain, and Teague and Gandara? Not any! Listen, I'm offerin' to run this thing, having the Double Spur on its feet and having enough loose cash to see me through—run it, while you and the rest 'tend to yore ranch duties, trying to save yore starved outfits on a farm-lot range. But when I start, I want hands off, and I want yore support to a man. That sound right?"

Clay Shepard nodded. "It sounds like plain common sense."

"Yo're talking foolish, Hurd," Arnott grinned. "Of course every man'll stand by yuh, and see the thing through. We got our choice, or quit the range!" He looked at Wain, who stood unmoving, intent eyes on the Ticote cowman.

"That apply to *you,* Adams?" The words came from Hurd.

"Go on with your plan."

"I've stated it in full. I want the backing of responsible men, the big owners of the Caracara, who won't run to cover if there's dust. That apply to *you?*"

"I don't delegate any man to do my killing, Hurd."

"Did I say anything about killing?"

"Not yet."

"Of course, we wouldn't harm any of those poor nesters," sneered Hurd. "How'd you stand on a platform like that?"

"Go on with yore speech."

The Ticote man rolled a new cigarette. "If it's quiet and peaceful war you want, Mister Adams, it'll come, on the trail of the other, to clean out the drags that are still here next summer." He shifted his gaze to Arnott. "These nesters can't live here without feed any more'n cattle—not as much, because they can't eat good grass, even, which there isn't any left for our stock. And

they can't raise a bean here unless they have water. That mean anything to you, gentlemen?"

"Water!" ejaculated Dishawn. "Ain't that boomer literature circulatin' back east full of stuff about the plans to build a dam on Spanish crick, on government land?"

"Uh-huh. And you heard what that lunger William said about a diversion dam. Recollect? I'll tell you something. I've been in touch with several government, private and Carey Act projects—and I know. All right. Those nesters depend absolutely on said dam, don't they? Without it, they'd starve themselves to death in less than a year, as soon as their money gives out—quicker'n cattle. See the point?"

"Yo're talkin' riddles, Hurd," grumbled Bittick. "If it was up to me, I'd say it's a six-gun and Winchesters—"

"And dynamite," cut in the Ticote chief, in subdued tones. "Remember, I'm not playing goat for any man, and when I say dynamite I don't mean a think that you don't mean—including Mister Adams! For yore benefit, I'll state that the whole U. S. army *might* guard the temporary dam that the nesters are planning next spring—and then they mightn't! And who's going to arrest who when the dam refuses to do business, after it's built—if that dam goes down every time she's put up? Sabe?

"We ain't waitin' till spring!" from Dishawn. "Our cows'll have narrer enough range, without bein' squeezed this winter."

"There's a lot more figger we'll all be broke by spring, unless something's done," affirmed Charley Arnott. "C'mon, let's end it here; we'll get together again in a day or two, soon as the troops hit the trail." He piled up on the saddle. Wain, with a sense of relief, mounted quickly, beside the silent Murch Lea. The two Diamond Four men turned their horses due west, homeward. Arnott yelled at them.

"Dinner's waitin'! Where yuh goin'?"

They went back, joined the group, knowing it would be an affront to do otherwise. When the little cavalcade, including Hurd, reached the Box A news was waiting. Pots, the cook, shouted from the kitchen doorway; "Dinner's goin' to be late, account of me chasin' cattle thieves!"

"Thieves, eh?" exclaimed Arnott.

"Yes, thieves!" Judy was running toward them. Pots reproved her with a look.

"Now you don't tell it second-hand. Let me tell it! Yeah, you recollect that silk-hat, actor-lookin' nester that come here to buy meat this mornin' early? Yeah—that's the one—him and three others. Killed a steer, up there in the scrub. Fat Stevens heered the shot. Danged if they didn't fire on Fat, but he was safe, bein' so thin. When I got up there, them four was hauling the carcass away in a buckboard. I didn't have no gun or I'd drapped them—the whole four—like I would a snake—"

"Didn't have a gun," grunted Arnott. "What way'd they go?"

"West. I'd follered them, if it wasn't I knowed you'd be home for dinner, so I come back. It'll be easy enough to round 'em up. Dallas and Fat is still after 'em."

"Shore, with Dallas back," admitted Arnott. Other Box A riders were returning. Arnott dispatched two to join Fat and the foreman. "See about them nesters skinnin' a steer. Feller with a high silk hat, looks like an actor. Bring the four of 'em in, Wiggy tell Dallas."

He led the way into the house, arm-in-arm with Judy. "Now what's our next move?" he wanted to know. "After we ketch them thieves? Judy, see if you cain't rassle Pots along with the dinner—we're all nigh starved." He had invited the girl to withdraw for a reason.

Wain Adams had been thinking of that. West River and its sheriff and court were too far away—two hundred miles—for legal action, and the federal forces would not handle a case of beef theft, petty in their eyes, monumental in the eyes of the cattle-poor ranchers. Handsome Hurd, rolling a fresh cigarette, spoke quietly:

"This all couldn't have happened prettier for us, Mister Arnott."

"Yuh mean this—thievin'?"

"Yeah. Only one thing could have been better—if they'd have shot down a dozen beeves."

"It's bad enough," growled Arnott. "They're startin' in early. Didn't expect 'em to steal quick as that. They'll be ketched, and then—?"

"It couldn't hardly be better," repeated the Ticote man. "Putting the law on our side, at the same time we start our program rolling, to make Caracara climate unhealthy for nesters." He jerked around at the door. "There come yore riders already, with the prisoners!"

CHAPTER XVII

The Big and Little Junta

DALLAS HINES, Wiggy, Fat and the other rider were standing guard over four thoroughly frightened homesteaders, whom they had trotted before them on foot. "Dallas rounded 'em up, and we run into 'em," announced Wiggy, as Charley Arnott and his fellow cowmen hurried out, silent and grim-faced.

"Took 'em acrost the crick," informed Dallas, his oaken skin drawn into hard lines. "They was sidin' down with a jack-knife in the mesquite. That old ticky scar-laig steer, Charley—they didn't even have sense enough to pick good meat."

"Tell Miss Judy to come out; you come here too, Pots," Arnott motioned to the wide-eyed cook in the side doorway. When Judy appeared Arnott asked her and Pots which one of the four had come to the Box A in the morning to buy beef; they identified the one wearing a top hat that looked like an actor.

"All right." The Box A owner waited until Judy had gone into the house, gestured to the cottonwoods below the corrals, then started saddling. The others, including Wain, mounted their ready horses, out of force of habit, even for the short distance. They walked the prisoners south. Wain looked inquiringly at Arnott, who twisted his mouth meaningly. "A scare'll do 'em good," he said, in an undertone.

At the cottonwoods Arnott unbuckled his saddle rope, with a side glance at the Diamond Four man.

"What are you going to do!" exclaimed the dude nester; his features were a sickening, chalky white.

"Try yuh!" Arnott questioned the remaining witnesses. Fat Stevens told of seeing them shoot the steer, of being driven off by their pistol fire. Dallas told of returning from the land-rush and joining Stevens, of finding them with the partially-skinned steer. The prisoners were questioned; their story was that they were going back immediately to the ranch to pay for the beef, at retail prices, or better.

"That's all," snapped Arnott, sarcastically; he turned to his fellow cowmen. "What's yore verdict?"

"Guilty!" from every throat. Wain Adams chuckled inwardly; stealing beef was serious enough, but in this case the nesters had got little. They merited the scare they were getting. He shook out his rope, but Charley Arnott had beaten him to the big limb of the largest cottonwood. Wain took a smaller one, as did Bittick and Hurd.

The high-hatted prisoner gulped, wet his lips. "S-surely you wouldn't commit murder for a b-b-beef!" Nate Bittick laid a rough hand on his shaking shoulder. Handsome Hurd closed a big paw around his flabby arm. "He's mine! He's not any better—not as good, as a horse thief!" Yanking the trembling nester around under his rope, he quickly folded circle on circle upon the bight, making the hangman's noose. The smallest of the victims, coolest in the lot, uttered protest, while he watched Arnott, Wain and Bittick knot their ropes:

"If you do this deed," he warned threateningly, "the troops will settle with you! Those cattle were on our land!"

"Yore land," echoed Arnott, scornfully.

"Land we settled upon this morning. If it will do you any good to know who we are, I'm Senator Farron's nephew; these other gentlemen have friends in Washington—"

"Sooners!" belched Hurd. "Thieves and cheats, even robbing those other nesters of their rights in the fake rush. String 'em up—and to hell with their talk about their pull!"

Wain exchanged a swift glance with Arnott. There was something in Hurd's attitude that was a stranger to humor, even of this grim sort. The Ticote cowman drew from a pocket a leather-back note-book. "We'll take their statement." He turned again to the conspicuous dude nester. "What's yore

names, and the land you took up?"

"The law is with us!" evaded the tall one. "Your cattle had no right on our land. The law doesn't even require us to fence against your livestock—"

"What's yore names and holdings?" cut in Hurd, threateningly.

THE names were forthcoming from the spokesman, Tiffany Levine. "We took up the whole northwest section—the four of us, with our tents in a bunch—the whole northwest section of Township three east, range one north, the best land—"

"Sure it's the best land," snapped Hurd, "or you sooners wouldn't have taken it! Now we'll finish this business up, pronto!" He darted forward, toward the frightened Levine, pinioned his gesturing arms, forced the rope about his neck, raised huge arms to tauten the device of execution. Wain Adams' words checked him.

"Reckon we better hold a little powwow over this, Hurd, before we proceed with carrying out the sentence!" The double meaning was not lost on the Ticote man, Wain knew, from his sullen reply:

"No further parley is called for, unless Mister Arnott and the rest of those present request it."

They did, without words, by moving aside with Wain, Arnott with his six-shooter in hand, menacingly weaving in the direction of the prisoners. "What's on yore mind, Wainey?" demanded the Box A owner, somewhat impatiently. Wain read the situation at a glance; whereas not one except Hurd had a notion of hanging the homesteaders in the beginning, they were half in the notion now, owing to the Ticote man's domination. The same factors were here that often allowed a strong-willed individual to lead a mob into violence.

"Reckon this little joke has gone far enough," affirmed Wain, his lips tightening.

"Joke!" belched Hurd, incredulously. "Whose cow romped on you?"

"Mister Arnott don't want a man's life for a scrub steer, Hurd, and these hombres won't get a chance to steal another." He addressed the others. "If there's going to be a war, we don't want to take first nester blood. It'll lose what little support we might get in Washington and the courts. We won't strangle these men, but send 'em back where they came from!"

His tone of positive assurance caused Arnott to stare, in doubt. Handsome Hurd turned his back, gestured in disgust. Wain Adams strode forward, addressed the alarmed nesters, raising his voice in command: "You four dudes start walking east. And keep going. This range don't happen to be big enough for cowmen and thieves, even if they've got the protection of the government and soldiers!"

No second invitation to the nesters was necessary; they struck out rapidly on a bee line for Providence. Wain, surprised that Handsome Hurd had offered no further protest, mounted beside Old Man Lea and turned in silence with Arnott toward the Box A and the delayed dinner. He thought he saw in Hurd's green-hued eyes a peculiar gleam of satisfaction over the sudden turn in affairs. This was partly explained when, after the meal, Charley Arnott called the cattlemen into his bare office room. "Mister Hurd thinks this happenin' merits some kind of play, without further waitin'."

The Ticote man nodded. "Not today or tonight, maybe, but before the week is out, and while we've got a good case of theft to back us up. But before we set the machinery in motion, I want to say frankly I don't like to lay my cards on the table in front of a party that's showing too damned much sympathy for nesters." He turned a coldly calculating eye on the Diamond Four owner. "As shown by his act less than an hour ago."

Wain turned an equally calculating gaze on the Ticote chief. "Sounds to me like you're four-flushing, Hurd. I'd be tempted to withdraw from the room and call yore bluff, making you name yore fairy tale play to drive the nesters out, before these other owners." His lips held an amused smile, which changed swiftly to a hard line. "But I don't do business that way, where Diamond Four's concerned, and I'm not leaving this parley till invited to do so by my other neighbors. And even then I'd guarantee to find out what's on foot that might affect the future of Caracara range!"

CHARLEY ARNOTT raised his long arms, gesturing impatiently. "Let's be shet of this fool talk. Wainey stays, as I said before. I'm vouchin' for him, as not bein' a friend of nesters. It's up to you, Mister Hurd, to state yore case, for all of us to act on equally as cowmen, or—"

"Sure! Now that that's settled, let me cut in a word." Handsome Hurd drew his big frame up erect. "The proof of the pudding, etcetera. Now, if I lay down my cards, will Mister Adams abide by the majority, and, with the rest of you, *take an oath of secrecy on said plans?*"

Wain felt the eyes of his neighbor cattlemen upon him, realized Hurd had cleverly put the test of loyalty to him. "Depends upon what those plans involve, Mister Hurd," he said evenly.

"We'll put it another way." The Ticote man smiled grimly. "Them that won't bind themselves by the action of the Caracara forces, taking the pledge of secrecy, can withdraw from this meeting before we take action. How's that?"

"Square enough," grunted Arnott. "Wain'll abide by that."

"Let him say it."

Wain nodded sarcastic assent.

"Now to business. As I stated before I'm willing to take the contract to rid the range of nesters, with my little handful of the Double Spur. But I'm not willing to hold the sack, doing the work of the rest. That fair? All right. What I want is the backing of the real owners of the range—you that's here today. So I'd like you to organize yoreselves into a body—don't care what you call it—that's give me authority to clean out the land grabbers—"

"Without us knowing how, when or where?" queried Wain, sourly.

"I'm laying out my cards, Mister Adams. Call it anything you like—it'll be a body that'll work in the quiet, under cover, and with us pledged to secrecy no one can lay hands on us. See the racket?"

"Call ourselves The Invisible Hand!" grinned Bittick.

"Rotten! This ain't no mellerdrammer," grunted Dish Dishawn.

"No, it's serious business," affirmed Arnott. "How about the Righteous Range Avengers?"

"Worse'n ever." Silent Hide Burman had a suggestion. "If we're goin' to sweep the range clean, why not The White Wings? That's what they call 'em in the city."

"We ain't sproutin' wings," flung back Arnott.

"No, we ain't sproutin' wings," grinned Hurd. "Any name'll suit me. Call yoreselves The Annihilators if you want to because that's sure what's going to happen—the nesters that don't heed our warning will be annihilated, so far as Caracara range is concerned!"

"Murder?" queried Wain, pointedly.

"You're seeing things, Adams. No, the poor downtrodden nesters, including the pretty blonde bride, won't even be ropeburned. They'll just drop out of sight of the cow country, that's all!"

"And you expect us to give you authority to look after that little detail, in yore own way?" Wain's eyes narrowed.

"Yeah. Now what's yore pleasure? Or do I withdraw my offer?"

Charley Arnott scratched his bushy hair vigorously. "You say there ought to be two bodies—the main Annihilators, say, and the workin' bunch of Little Annihilators, consisting of yoreself, Paint Mustain, Gandara and Pinky Teague?"

"That's right."

"I reckon we might give it a trial." Arnott looked from one to the other. "Since Mister Hurd pledges hisself there won't be any violence, like killin', what's the consensus?" He put the question around. All agreed it wouldn't be a bad idea to give the thing a trial, until Wain Adams was reached.

"I'm pledged to secrecy," said the Diamond Four man, "even if I don't take part in this thing. But if there's going to be a body calling itself the Annihilators, and another inner junta that's to do the work, the only way I'm willing to join such an organization is through the inner circle. If you'll name me with Hurd, Mustain, Teague, and Gandara, count me in."

"Shore," grinned Arnott. "Them four will be tickled pink to have yuh. Come to think of it, I'll join the inner junta myself."

"Me too!" vociferated Dishawn, and the assent became a chorus. "Why cain't we all do the work?" insisted Burman.

"Because," returned Handsome Hurd, smiling, "it would defeat the

whole scheme, to have more than four. But since Mister Adams won't come in any other way, I'll move he be one of the inner circle of five."

It was done. Wain Adams was satisfied, for the reason that his sole purpose in joining with Hurd and his gunmen was to keep an eye on their every move, to make sure they did not commit the cattlemen to acts that would defeat their aims.

CHAPTER XVIII

Ordered to Vacate

BUT as Wain Adams rode home with Old Man Lea doubts began to assail him as to the wisdom of the step taken. The veteran foreman added to these doubts.

"What's his game?" asked Murch, frowning deeply.

"I'd like to know. Cinch he's got a job on his hands to clean the range of nesters."

"Yeppy. But what I mean is, what's his game drawin' you into that Nihilist movement?"

Wain smiled. "Annihilators, eh? You think he *drew me in,* Murch? I'm beginning to wonder."

"So'm I. Looks to me like he hooked you, Wainey, to stand sponsor for his deviltry direct. You got to watch that hombre, boy."

"Wait and see."

No more was said, and when the cañoncita was reached, the foreman rode off at a tangent toward the lower corrals. Wain continued up the main trail, pondering, in no cheerful mood. He had not stayed as long as he wanted to, to see Judy, although he knew Hurd had remained at the Box A. He knew that Judy was incensed at events in Providence, due to Hurd's unjust insinuations. Yet what else could he have done than to play the rôle of a gentleman even toward Ann Franklin, the nester bride-to-be? Some day Hurd would pay for that trick; Wain knew the Ticote man had played a part before Judy for a purpose. Hurd was dealing in some kind of a deep game, in all his actions, and Wain must bide his time to get at his motives.

Regardless of whether Hurd had contrived to lead Wain into a criminally-responsible organization that might do violence to the nesters, the Diamond Four man did not wholly regret his action in joining. It would not be an easy task to fraternize with Hurd, Mustain, Teague and Gandara in doing the "work" involved; but Wain would at least have an eye on things and know what was being done in his own name and that of Charley Arnott and the others. The cattlemen of the Caracara meant well; they were justified in taking steps to keep themselves from starvation. But Wain doubted that Hurd or anyone else could suggest a permanent remedy, now that the nester invasion had actually been accomplished. All the homesteaders could not be driven off by threats. Others would flock in to take the places of those removed, as long as the government held the land open—and the government would give protection to the settlers. It was something to drive out the sooners, if that could be done; but so far as the cattlemen were concerned, the sooners were no greater menace than people like Ann and William.

Wain's thoughts were not made more cheerful by the knowledge that in two days Barry Berg would take steps to collect on the notes. That emergency must be met, and Wain knew there was nowhere he could go to raise the money. He was firmly resolved that the Diamond Four brand must not be sold off the range, none the less. On that his mind was made up.

He passed the gate of the wire fenceline of his deeded land, rounded the curve of the creek and emerged from the willows and cottonwoods. On the rise to the south of the creek he saw the first nester encamped in a new white tent. Some distance further on there was another. "Sooners," he reflected disgustedly. "Picked the river land—what chance have those other poor devils got?"

On the open range he followed above the creek. Suddenly he drew up, gazed on a frantically-waving figure beyond the water course.

IT was a woman. Wain's eyes swept the range; there was no one else to whom she could be waving. He used spurs, galloped directly to the creek,

crossed it, and saw it was the nester girl, Ann Franklin. He went the few rods between them, reined up.

"Something dreadful has bitten Mr. Crabtree!" she cried, excitedly. "Won't you please help him?"

"Snake?" Wain dismounted.

"It may have been—he is poisoned!" She was striding through the low scrub, leading the way to a clump of mesquite. Under a tarpaulin spread from bush to bush sat William Crabtree, groaning miserably, rocking back and forth. His pallid face had turned a sickly yellow.

"Let's see yore injury," drawled Wain, bending beside him. William pointed to his neck, raising his small, narrow head. The cowman looked at the row of red marks, like pin-points, that were causing the tenderfoot's discomfort.

"Got a desert bracelet. You're all right." Wain turned toward his horse.

"But-but, can't you give me some w-whiskey? I never heard him rattle, but—"

"Oh, what was it?" Ann appealed to the cowman, still distressed and fearing he may have been hiding the truth.

"Centipede," grinned Wain. "Make him a little sick, that's all." He rose to the saddle.

"Why, you're the same cowboy who —befriended us!" she exclaimed, meeting his gaze directly for the first time, so engrossed had she been in her sweetheart's plight. "We are more grateful than we can say. Aren't we lucky, too, finding this claim?"

Wain looked about him, at the sand and desolation, the fringe of bosque on the creek. "Yeah, lucky. How'd you get this close to the creek, when the sooners grabbed everything?"

"Rare good fortune! We had about given up in utter discouragement when another man told us about J. B., as he called him. He is a locator, and had placed the people in his party, and was coming back, when he met us. He took us out to find the claim on our map, but he said the sooners, what ever that is, had taken all the good claims, and ours were gone too. He had to get substitute claims even for his own clients. Then we passed here, just as some cowboy took four men away, saying they were cattle thieves and would never come back. J. B. gave us this quarter section, and the one next. And he wouldn't take a cent fee, because we had already paid that rascal, Bingo Goodman."

"J. B. treated us like human beings," put in William, weakly.

"You're lucky," admitted Wain. "Got two claims, have you?"

"Each a claim. J. B. explained that if William and I followed our plan to be married immediately, we could take only one, as the government doesn't give two to one family. So we thought it over, didn't we, William, and decided to take a claim each, and wait until we prove up or commute, before marrying. There is my mansion in that little dip." She raised a hand. Wain saw another bit of canvas stretched from a rock to a clump of scrub oak.

"We'll each homestead a quarter section, separately," enlightened the now happy girl, "and then we'll have three hundred and twenty acres!" Her face glowed.

The cowman turned aside, eyes serious. There was tragedy in the plight of these two babes in the wood, combatting the raw rangeland without even a horse or a plow

"You got any money, Crabtree?" he asked. William nodded dubiously.

"I have a little, and he has a hundred dollars," the girl said, simply. "Enough to buy equipment. How far away do you live, Mister?"

"Over there," informed Wain, dryly, indicating the flat frame buildings and corrals on the opposite slope, two miles off.

"Then we shall be neighbors," she said, eagerly. "Do you mind if William and I visit your ranch, some time?"

"Don't do it!" said the cowman, shortly. "Cattlemen and nesters don't mix in this country. I'd advise you to pull up stakes before yore money gets too low for railroad fare back." He flipped the reins and spurted through the cactus and greasewood toward the creek.

"THE two danged fools," thought Wain, aloud, as he forded the little stream. "Expect to make a living here where even cattle can't find grass any more." Thinking of the plight of the young couple, his own situation seemed less hopeless.

Jingling harness and clattering wag-

ons sounded down the bosque trail, beyond the turn in the direction taken by the cowman. In a moment he heard the booming voice of a man, and two wagons broke into view, at the head of which rode J. B. "Right up here a ways, people!" the locator was orating. "As pretty a hundred and sixty for each of you as the hand of the Creator ever made —free to you, without a fee!" Wain saw the red-cheeked Mrs. McKim and her gaunt husband, at the same time they sighted him.

"It's that cowboy! My lands, yes—the one that's the friend of us pore immygrants! Howdy-do, sir! Howdy-do!" She waved her arms, toward the trailing wagon, in which Wain saw the hairy Jake Meiggs, pale Mrs. Meiggs and the golden-haired girl. Wain rode on.

"Don't be in a hurry, sir" shrilled Mrs. McKim. "Tell us about them cattle thieves you cowboys druve off these claims we're goin' to take up! Thanks to old J. B.!" she added shrilly.

Wain nodded curtly. "I'm in a hurry." He rode on, deliberately sidestepping their efforts at friendliness. Yet he would have liked to hear more of their plans. Here was an example of what would happen when nesters were driven off—others would immediately take their places. Four quarter sections had been abandoned by the sooners who had slain the steers. J. B. had immediately discovered the fact and had, out of generous impulses, found a haven for Ann and William and the McKim and Meiggs families.

When Wain jogged into the Diamond Four ranchyard, Old Man Lea, who had beaten his boss home, by half an hour, was waiting for him. "Lookee yere what I found, Wainey!" he spat out, in anger. "Right on the crick, less'n a mile from the bunk-house." His wrinkled face was grim as he led Wain over to the corral fence.

A green hide was hanging across the top rail; a glance showed the little cowman the Diamond Four brand. Wain inspected the exhibit critically.

"Bloody, and jagged at the neck," he muttered. "A greenhorn that didn't even have a sticking knife; he left the hide on the head, and didn't skin out the legs. Didn't know enough to beat the fell or snap off over the flank, but chopped it out. A nester." He turned away, face muscles taut. "You don't have any idea who?"

"Found the hide, and that's all I know, Wainey. Where'll it end?"

Wain didn't know. It would be harder to find these thieves than the others. The foreman, with Trig Malone, Tommy Hueber and the boss, skirted the creek bosque and beyond until dark, rode by a dozen nester camps, without finding a trace of newly-killed beef. A more thorough search was planned for morning.

But when morning arrived and the riders were ready to set out, Wain was given something else to think about. A determined-faced young woman strode into the ranchyard; she had come on foot the two miles from the cabin.

"William and I have been robbed," she announced, in unemotional tones. "By cowboys. They came during the night and took my bag containing three hundred dollars and stole William's hundred. I thought since some of you decent cowboys punished those other thieves you might try to get our money back for us."

"What did those men look like?" asked Wain narrowly.

"I couldn't see their faces in the dark. There were four of them. And they did something else, too, I found out just before I left. They gave orders to a lot of our neighbors to vacate, thought they didn't tell us to leave."

"Gave 'em orders to vacate?" queried Wain, slowly.

"Yes. Mr. Evans, on the south of us, brought this over as I was leaving; said a lot of others got them, too." She extended a white card, four inches square, on which was lettered in red ink:

MR. NESTER:

You are hereby ordered to leave the country. Take the first train out of Providence Wednesday. If you don't you'll DROP OUT OF SIGHT.

THE ANNIHILATORS.

CHAPTER XIX

Tying Up With Nesters

WAIN'S first impulse on learning how swiftly Handsome Hurd's inner junta had fired the first gun in the underground nester war was to look up

the Ticote chief and demand an explanation why all members of the so-called little committee of action had not been consulted. Yet he knew very well why he had not been taken into Hurd's confidence. He would not have consented to such a foolhardy act, on the first night after the land opening, without even waiting for the departure of the troops.

But on reflection he decided to ask Hurd nothing; there was a lot of funny business about this thing; and Hurd's very affront to him would give him a certain freedom of action he craved to pry into affairs both among the homesteaders and at the Double Spur.

He had dismissed Ann Franklin without committing himself before even his own Diamond Four men. "I can't undertake to get yore money back, Miss," he said, quietly. "You'll have to communicate with the sheriff at West River, or wait a couple days till his deputy opens an office in Lingo. Of course if I get the proof who took it, I'll do what I can. Have you got any grub on hand?"

"We are not asking for charity," retorted the girl, haughtily. "We have enough provisions for some time, and I can get work in town." She turned on her heel.

"I'm going that direction, ma'am. Can you ride a horse? You're welcome. Murch, we'll ride that way."

"No, thanks, I don't ride," she returned stiffly, and struck out over the open range.

"Now what?" queried Old Man Lea, mounting and waiting for his boss. "You want on'y me to go?"

Wain nodded, motioned to Trig Malone and Tommy Hueber. "You two can strike north, on the trail of that butchered beef."

As Wain took the saddle, beside Murch Lea, the veteran looked him squarely in the eye. "*We* ain't goin' on the trail of any beef," he said, meaningly.

"Not any." They passed the supple-striding Ann Franklin. Wain halted a second. "You didn't see if one of those robbers was a big fellow?"

"Like the one you had the trouble with?" Her tones were icy. "No. Ask William; he got a better look at them."

"What I thought." Wain went into a lope, overtook the foreman, Murch frowned. "Them nesters is hangin' round Diamond Four too damn much," he grunted. "Givin' us a black eye."

"Yeah." Wain agreed thoroughly, overlooking the old man's tendency to be personal—his heart was right. At the creek the boss halted.

"You ride east—see how many got those notices—if you're willing to risk buckshot. May be gunning for cow folk. I'll start at this end, meet you about the carrizo flat."

Murch grinned, took the bosque trail. Wain forded the stream, cut up to the tarpaulin of William Crabtree. That worthy was trying to shave himself, with a spoonful of water from a canteen.

"No, sir," he answered Wain's question. "That big brute wasn't one of them. I'd know him anywhere."

"One of 'em have a mark on his face?"

"Not that I noticed, and my lantern was lighted when they woke me up. I don't think Ann would know; she didn't have any light."

"Why'd you have a light?"

"To scare off those beastly centipedes!"

"Light draws 'em, hombre. Where does this Mister Evans hang out his washing do you suppose?"

WILLIAM motioned to the claim adjoining his to the south, along the creek. When the Diamond Four men had crossed the mesquite flat he found a new tent pitched on the Evans claim. Sounds of voices reached his ear from within:

"We've filed, and made reg'lar affidavit, and won't be scairt off by no cattlemen. We got the government behind us! We'll fight 'em to the last ditch! What's that?" The voice stilled and Wain saw a shaggy head thrust through the tent flap. It withdrew and in a moment six nester men were before the tent, rifles, shotguns and pistols in hand.

"Git!" The word came from the shaggy-headed one.

"I'm looking for Mister Evans."

"Git!" The leader raised his rifle.

"Don't reckon you'll shoot, hombre."

The cowman grinned. "If you're Mister Evans, I'm looking for information. How many got notices to vacate?"

The unshaven homesteader lowered his rifle. "You know who got notices. I'm Evans. Tell your feller renegades we six stays. Git!" The rifle came up again.

Wain slowly rolled a cigarette, crooked a leg in the saddle. "Only six get threats, Mister Evans?"

"That's enough. This is our land. Git!" Other guns came up, menacingly. "Next time we'll shoot first, tell you cow outlaws to git afterwards. Git!" Guns cocked ominously.

Wain lit his smoke. A cow pony loomed from behind the tent, in the soft sand. "Put down them weepons, nestermen!" sang out the voice of Old Man Lea. Heads turned, to face Murch's leveled Colt.

"It's all right, Murch. They don't mean it," grinned Wain. "They're touchy—don't blame 'em. We'll ride." The boss swung about. The nesters' guns were down and Murch holstered his, followed Wain back up the creek.

"They're in an ugly mood," remarked the owner. "Somebody's going to get hurt before Ticote and his three hands take those six. Now what's going on?" He gestured to the left. A group was gathered about William Crabtree's tarpaulin, where a rotund woman was flourishing her arms in a man's face; others were gesticulating, plainly angry, even at that distance. The cowmen went the distance at a fast lope.

Red-cheeked Lucy McKim had both arms in full swing before a thick-set well-dressed stranger. "You're a reg'lar, ord'nary common, low-down, bare-faced swindler, liar and thief!" she spat out, disdainfully. "Ab, if you was any good, you'd lick him to an inch of his life—" She broke off short. "My lands, if it ain't that cowboy! And here comes Ann, too! Ho, Annie! Here's that scamp Bingo Goodman that tuk our money, and never even located us, and now he's got the gall to come yere and say we ain't got any right to these claims that old J. B. picked fer us. Didja ever hear of such scand'lous—" She would have rattled on indefinitely but for the interruption of Ann, who had turned swiftly toward Goodman.

"What is the matter with you?" she demanded, scornfully.

"Matter enough!" The boomer bristled. "This land's been filed on by my clients, soldiers' widows, and no residence necessary. You've all got to get off this section immediately. Understand?"

"Soldiers' widders," sneered Mrs. McKim, contemptuously. "It's a dirty swindle—and you tuk our money—"

"I never ever saw you before."

"W-what!" gasped the woman. "What! You never even seen—"

"What about our money?" queried Ann Franklin coldly.

"Who are *you?*"

"I'll show you who I am." The nester girl drew her statuesque figure to its full height, faced him, with clear, steady eye. "Don't you lie to *me*. I want back the hundred dollars you took from me and this man," turning toward William, "and if you don't pay it I'll blow your brains out, Mister!" Her lips were pale with desperate purpose.

The boomer shrugged his bulky shoulders, turned away. He grinned toward Wain and Old Man Lea, made a circle with his thumb and finger at his temple. "Daffy all of 'em," he grunted. "I never saw any 'om. They'll get off these four claims—today—or I'll put 'em off!" He strode toward his handsome bay saddle horse.

"It's a steal," growled the hairy Jake Meiggs. "I didn't see this girl and her feller have dealin' with him, but McKim and me stopped off in Kansas City and paid over our money and got nothing!"

Bingo Goodman stepped to the saddle. Wain Adams spurted forward, intercepted him. "Listen, hombre. You're not coming back to disturb these people any."

The boomer stiffened. "No?"

"Not any."

"You're one of these guys that are trying to scare off the homesteaders, eh?" Goodman's lips held a sneer. "You the chief of these Annihilators, eh?" He laughed easily.

"You'll be annihilated, hombre, if you disturb these folks, savvy? Be a good idea, too, if you'd bring back these people's money."

"Think so?"

"Uh huh. Now ride!"

The fellow turned languidly in the saddle, yawned, showed big gold-plated teeth. "I'll ride when—"

He did not finish, for the cowman's bronco plunged for the handsome bay with a sudden spurt that sent the big horse sideways with a grunt; saddle crashed saddle, and Wain's quirt gave the bay the spur that sent the horse out

under its ride. Goodman flopped on the sand ungraciously; rose red-faced and profane.

"Now walk!"

He did, in the wake of his horse. Wain Adams turned toward Murch Lea, raised a hand, and the two cowmen took through the scrub toward the creek and home. "Looks like rain," commented Murch, as they hit the bosque.

"Sure need it a lot."

"Now what'll yeh do, Wainey? Kinda bad to tie up with them nesters, helpin' 'em out thataway, don't yuh think?"

"Wait and see, Murch. Strike you funny, any, about that soldier-widow play?"

"How'd yuh mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Wait and see. Wonder if Tommy and Trig got any track of those beefers?"

AT the ranch they found no further clue to the cow thieves. Wain erased it from his mind, with things more important to engage his interest. The day was Tuesday. On the morrow one of the two trains a week left Providence—the one the proscribed nesters must take to avoid the wrath of Handsome Hurd.

"Reckon there's not a thing we can do but wait," the boss confided in Old Man Lea. He said nothing about Wednesday being also the fateful seventeenth—at the bank.

Tuesday night it not only rained; it poured. Starting in late evening, the elements drenched the ranch from the Midnights to the Malpais and beyond. Wain thought of the plight of the nesters with their meager shelter; particularly of Ann and William and their unwalled tarpaulin tents. But the joy of a middle November rain that would mean good forage for months was uppermost.

But for the nesters and the threat of the bank, that one rain would have meant the salvation of the Diamond Four. Wednesday morning Wain Adams saddled and rode along Spanish Creek, now a booming river, into Lingo. He brought his mount to the hitch-rack before the Bank of Lingo, went inside and entered the private office of Barry Berg.

"Haven't changed yore mind about extending that loan, Mister Berg?"

The banker smiled unctuously. "I am very sorry, Vain, dot it iss imbossible!"

"I'm not standing trial for murder—one of the reasons you gave."

"No, maybe no, Vain, but—"

"This rain means you'll have more security next spring than you have today."

"It iss imbossible. The pank—"

Wain slid into the chair opposite the pudgy banker, drew his six-shooter out casually, laid it on the flat-top desk. "I want those notes renewed, Berg, for six months—regardless of what you or Handsome Hurd or anyone else says, savvy?"

Berg's pop-eyes bulged from their sockets. "Come around later, and ve vill."

"No, not later. Get out yore papers, make out the new ones, Barry. Now!"

"Vell, vell, Vain, you are kidding me! If you haf turned gunman—"

"Now!"

Wain signed the new notes and left the bank for Providence, to see how many, if any, of the threatened nesters would leave the country on the specified day.

CHAPTER XX

In Bunches of Six

WAIN ADAMS was not the only one to go to Providence that morning to see the train depart for West River and the east; there were a score of riders from the different outfits up and down Caracara Valley, all keen to know if the warning of the secret body, the Annihilators, was being heeded. Strange to say, scarcely a man of them could have picked out the six nesters who had been notified to leave, and Wain was asked more than one question whether the exiled bunch, or any part of them, were on hand. He did not enlighten his questioners, though he knew not one of the men in Evans' tent the morning before was present.

One thing struck him: the absence of Hurd, Arnott, Dishawn, Burman, Bittick, Mustain, Teague, Gandara and every man who was in any way identified with the threats. The reason drove home to him: if the proscribed nesters had procured a lawyer or detective, his move would be to watch who among the cattle-

men interested would put in an appearance.

"Charlie and Hurd were wiser'n I am," he reflected grimly, after one or two pointed questions from cowpunchers had indicated that Wain was the one to point out the fleeing nesters—who did not flee. He turned away in disgust at his own foolhardiness.

That Wednesday night, Wain and Old Man Lea rode down the creek after dark. The Diamond Four owner felt that Murch was one man who would stay with him after all others had deserted. "I've found out something, Murch," he said. "All these nesters ordered out hold claims in a row, along the creek."

"Yeah?" The foreman was not slow in the head, but he did not understand. "Reckon it would be easier for Handsome to clean 'em out in a row."

Wain did not explain what was in his mind. They forded the swollen stream and crossed to the nester side. There they separated, after Wain made clear the object of the night ride. "If you see a nester being manhandled or interfered with, ride back west; I'll be moving east, and we'll come together."

"You plan to interfere?"

"I reckon not; but I want to see what's being done. Don't get too close to a nest; they might be watching for cowboys."

Through the night they maintained their watch, which was fruitless. At daybreak five gaunt and shivering nesters left the Evans tent; Wain reailzed they had been prepared.

After snatching a few hours' sleep in the morning, the little cowman resolved to visit the Box A. He hungered for a sight of Judy, and Charley Arnott should know that Hurd was going it alone, without consulting the fifth member of the committee. He was puzzled.

Charley was absent—down at the Double Spur, Fat Stevens said, Judy was with him. But Judy returned alone and Wain met her where the Diamond Four forked off from the Box A. She passed him with a nod, though he had halted on sighting her.

"Don't ride away, Miss Judy. I've got something to say to you."

She turned slowly, her eyes listless.

"I wanted to see yore dad; you can tell him I've resigned from that committee. He'll know what I mean."

She smiled sweetly. "Resigning? I know what you mean, Wain. We—sort of expected it."

"You sort of expected it," he replied, slowly. "Who do you mean by 'we'?"

"Why, all of us, Mr. Hurd and father included—after the way you have been carrying on with certain nester—people."

WAIN laughed uneasily. "I don't know what you mean—carrying on. You'll have to explain, Miss Judy. I'm plumb sorry that ruckus happened with Hurd, the other day, but no man could see him throw down his gun and not face him."

"With the help of a very charming young woman, fresh from the city." She smiled amusedly.

"Shucks. That nester girl was plain foolish, Judy. You couldn't blame me—"

"Why shouldn't she try to aid her gallant young cowboy rescuer, in trouble? Oh, Wain, it's really funny!" Her laughter seemed genuine.

"Judy Arnott, you're not holding a grudge like that against me?" His eyes were serious.

"I don't hold anything against you, Wain—of course not. What is a little thing like a promise between friends!"

"Hurd called my hand—" he pleaded.

"The other fellow, of course!" Her lips were merry. "I suppose Mr. Hurd was responsible for your Hotspur chivalry this morning. Oh, my, Wain, you're positively a scream!" She laughed long and musically, while Wain Adams' eyes contracted, swiftly succeeding his amazement. How had she learned the only thing she could have meant?

"You better explain that," he retorted, coldly.

"Explain? Why, everyone on the range is talking about your lucky arrival at the—bride's—tarp palace, just in time to send her wicked persecutor a-flying. Dear me! How considerate of you, too, to threaten that boomer if he did not return her money." Her eyes glinted. "No wonder you're resigning from the cattlemen's committee, to become the savior of the nesters, Wain. You really couldn't do otherwise."

"Oh, Miss Judy, please don't say that." He leaned from the saddle, pleadingly. Her manner checked him.

He stiffened. "It's no use to explain, I reckon. What I started to say was that I'm resigning the committee for a reason, and wanted yore dad to know that his Ticote friend went ahead without me—" Again he cut off. "I'm no squealer!" he shot out viciously.

"Mr. Hurd again," she purred, exasperatingly.

"The devil take it all! I've changed my mind. I'll not quit the junta. I'll ask you a favor, Miss Judy—not to repeat what I was said, even to yore dad. Tell him I was looking for him." He swung about. "Adios!"

"There he comes now—you can tell him yourself!" Judy sent her mount ahead, on the Box A trail. Wain had seen Arnott, approaching with a companion, Handsome Hurd.

He waited for them. As they rode up, Arnott seemed different. The Ticote cowman spoke before Wain could take him to task.

"Why'd' you hurry away so quick Monday afternoon, before we could make plans, Adams?"

"Hurry away?" Wain eyed the big blond narrowly. "I reckoned I'd be consulted, being a member of that committee, and I didn't count on any fool play like you made before even the troops left."

Hurd grinned. "Troops were recalled that same night. I happened to know they would be—and I've got a certain influential friend in Washington that'll keep 'em away. Sheriff deals with us in future, and he happens to owe his election to cattlemen."

"I'm waiting for yore next move, Hurd, and I want to know when it's made."

Charley Arnott stirred uneasily in the saddle, scraped his throat. "I've taken yore place on that committee, Wain, as the fifth member."

"Why?" queried the little cowman bluntly.

"Figgered you might not want to go through with it, from what you stated that afternoon, and the way you hurried off, and all, not countin' you and Mister Hurd are at loggerheads and mightn't team together."

"Reckon we might not," assented Wain, shortly.

"Listen, Wainey boy!" Arnott's attitude was not unkindly now. "I know you ain't the kind to go back on yore pledge of secrecy; but it don't look right, the way you've been mixin' with certain nesters. For yore own good I'd advise yuh to ride clear of 'em."

"Referring to what?"

"Nothin' in partic'lar. On'y yo'll have a handfull, tryin' to get back them settlers' money and upholdin' their right to stay on Caracara range right acrost the crick from the Box A and yore own outfit."

"Any other charges, Charley?"

"I reckon not. On'y you and Murch Lea was seen ridin' the nester line last night. Why'd' you do that?"

"Maybe I was looking after the interests of the Diamond Four and all the other cattle outfits, Charley."

"Mayhap on'y Diamond Four. I dunno. You blocked Berg on yore notes, with a six-gun. Now Berg's got to close on me, Wainey, to meet his needed cash."

THE little cowman's expression sobered. "Berg going to call in on you, Charley? When?"

"In three months."

There was nothing further to be said. Wain's show of force had saved the Diamond Four temporarily, but had brought greater pressure on Arnott. Wain Adams thought swiftly; he regretted keenly that Arnott had let himself into the inner Ticote band of destructionists. Arnott might not be as well able to take care of himself as one like Wain, who was thoroughly suspicious of Hurd's motives. But now was no time to argue the matter with the Box A owner. Hurd spoke:

"You're on that committee, ex-officio, Adams. Watch yore step. If anything leaks the cattlemen will know where to look."

"I don't know that I'm on that committee, ex-officio, Hurd."

"You agreed to abide by the decision, taking that pledge, or withdraw before the meeting was held, didn't you, hombre?"

"Not as an ex-officio member of any committee."

"But as one of the committee of the whole. You can't jump the traces now, Adams."

Hurd had him, and Wain realized it. The Diamond Four man and all the others had incriminated themselves—if criminal acts followed—when they as-

sented to name Hurd to clean the range.

"Reckon I'm an outsider, except where it comes to responsibility," mused Wain dryly. "No use for me to ask when you're going to clean out that first bunch of six nesters?"

"Why'd' you want to know?" asked Hurd, pointedly.

"Mere childish curiosity, I reckon."

"We don't want any slip-up, Adams, and that's why Charley took yore place."

"You've made yore play, Hurd. Foxy. Devilish long-sighted. But I'm not through, with this thing, or with you, savvy?"

Wain rode home at a slow jog, in deep thought. Slowly, but certainly, Handsome Hurd was taking precedence over him in the councils of the cattlemen, and even in the good opinion of Judy Arnott. The Ticote chief was playing his cards exceedingly well. Wain had called him, fought him twice, and won; yet the invading giant of another range was turning events to his own pattern, at every point. Wain had not forgotten the hidden .38 and the linsey coat; he had not discarded the letter of Alex Tipton in spite of the fact that Hurd had taken off his coat without revealing hidden weapons at Providence. Nor had he discarded the conviction that Handsome Hurd was the man who had taken the life of his brother Bill. But other things were making a showdown impossible without doing harm to others, including Charley Arnott. Hurd's money was tiding Charley over, at least for the three months until Berg took up the bank's loan. And Wain had promised Judy not to press personal differences until her father was safe from the consequences.

Someone had communicated the events of the morning at the Crabtree claim to Hurd, Arnott and others. Someone had spied upon Wain and Old Man Lea the night before. Both were unsolved mysteries. And Wain could not afford to lose the confidence of the cattlemen altogether; hence he did not ride the nester range that night, to face further spying and questioning of his motives and loyalty.

In the morning—the second after the serving of the notices on the first of the banished nesters — Old Man Lea woke him before daylight. "Them six nesters has dropped plumb out of sight," he drawled. "I took consent. Mayhap they've gone to town. We better ride down and see."

When they arrived in Lingo the news had preceded them. Pete Slavitik, proprietor of the Maverick, was recounting what he knew to an interested group: "They wasn't a shot fired, according to the nester that holds the claim east of 'em. All he seen was a bunch of men bein' driven into the bosque by riders. There was a stranger in here right after I opened the bar, and he opined nary one of them nesters would ever come back. I never seen that hombre before."

IN an unlighted card room in the rear of the Maverick Handsome Hurd and Paint Mustain sat with a bottle between them. "We spent the night at the home of Barry Berg," hummed the Ticote chief. "Barry will vouch for it. Now it'll be easy as drivin' white-face to get the rest of those nesters along the creek moving in little bunches of six. Then, when the time comes, we'll—"

"Them little bunches won't even wait for us to come after 'em," chuckled Mustain. "Not after learnin' about these first six!"

"Then, when the time comes, we'll serve notice on a certain other party—in a little bunch of one."

"Meanin'—"

"That little coyote runt Adams. And he won't ever come back either! He's sure got a long nose, that gent has, and he smells too damn much. We won't fill those vacated claims with settlers right off—we've got a bunch of women waiting at West River for that widow stunt, and the few men dummies we've got to use will file on the q. t. and wait their six months before entry; Barry Berg fixed that. But there's danger as long as this runt rides the range, and—" The speaker's huge frame bent forward swiftly; he made a quick gesture.

"Adams, in the barroom, asking Pete for us!" His ears strained, at approaching footsteps. "Get under cover of that door, Paint!" he shot out, in a whisper. mustain was sliding. "Pot him if I call him *Mister* Adams. Arnott'll stand for it now, and so will the rest!"

The door on the barroom side was flung open with a quick movement, throwing daylight into the windowless room, and revealing in the opening the diminutive frame of the little owner of

the Diamond Four.

"Hurd!" The word was uttered with low but sinister inflection. "You've got my tongue bridled on the nester play you made last night. But I've come to hear you tell me, for the good of the cattlemen themselves, what happened to that bunch of six last night on Spanish creek!"

CHAPTER XXI

"Ask Judy Arnott"

HANDSOME HURD sat in his deceptively languorous attitude behind the bottle of amber-colored liquor on the little poker-table; his expression changed not at all at the words of the Diamond Four man anent the fate of the banished nesters.

"Want to know what happened to 'em?" droned Hurd, in easy tones. "Why?"

Wain's eyes were on the rear door, flung back against the wall of the room; their focus had widened on entering to take in the Ticote chief at the table and the only other spot in the inclosure where a second man might lurk. That two men had been in that room, Wain knew from Pete Slavitik. And when he approached, the little cowman had moved directly from the bar in such a way as to command both the front and rear of the card-room; the back of the main hall was vacant; Paint Mustain had not left the place; therefore, Wain knew he was somewhere in the room with Hurd. The only possible hiding-place was behind the flung-back door; there was barely space for a man to screen himself, and Hurd's bold assuredness warned the newcomer that the spotch-faced gunman was on hand.

Ignoring the question of Hurd, Wain Adams spoke to the invisible foe behind the door. "Come out and sit down, Mustain, where I can see yore face."

Hurd sat up with a jerk. "You're loco, *Mister* Adams!"

"Am I—?" Wain cut off; his hand swept to his holster, at the faint, suspicious sound as of the cocking of a gun. His own weapon faced the Ticote chief and through him the hiding-place of Mustain. "Come out, hombre! Before I drill the door!"

Paint came, and his six-shooter was in its sheath. "Sit down!" Wain indicated the chair opposite Hurd.

"I didn't have no idee of shootin', 'less yuh pulled yore smoke-waggin on Handsome," grunted Mustain, "when he was settin' down and couldn't draw."

"You're probably lying, Mustain, but I reckon I can trust you both now, sitting." With a smooth movement he replaced his Colt. "Now, Hurd, let's hear yore story."

Hurd languidly rolled a cigarette, ignoring the question.

"Where'd you drive those nesters?"

THE Ticote cowman grinned. "Pore nesters. They haven't got any troops looking 'em up, the sheriff won't act, and the marshal can't do anything! But they've got a friend on the Caracara by the name of Adams that's worried plumb sick about 'em—and he can't do anything, either!" He laughed easily.

"Never mind who's their friend, Hurd. *Where are they?*" The question held a menace.

The other's bow mouth widened over flashing teeth. "I'm not in a mood to answer, Adams. And you can't Barry Berg me by laying out yore six-gun! Not being in any notion of picking a quarrel or reaching for a gun, and I don't reckon you'll make me answer, hombre, because I've got yore number. You won't shoot a man that won't draw, that's sitting down calm and peaceable-like, enjoying yore line of talk. Go on and orate!" He slumped forward, elbows sprawled across the table, yawned noisily. "Any other questions, you'd like to ask?"

Wain realized that Handsome Hurd had outgeneraled him with mere words. He held silence, without revealing the anger that rose within. Then he hurled a taunt that he knew would strike home. "Yore money won't bribe *all* the nesters to leave their river claims to you and yore boomer and banker friends, Hurd!"

He had taken a long shot; did not believe that Hurd or any man could afford to bribe the nesters to leave; but he watched the sinister flicker in the Ticote man's eyes at the mention of boomer and banker. Hurd's sprawling attitude vanished with his grim rejoinder:

"Yore tongue is courting trouble, Adams!"

"Trouble?"

"Trouble!"

"Now stand up and tell we where you drove those nesters."

Hurd did not stand, but his lips formed caustic words: "There's a certain party can give you all that information, Adams—if you stand with her like you think you do!"

His meaning was plain, but Wain ignored the reference to Judy, and Hurd continued:

"Those nesters were not bribed to leave, Adams." He laughed easily. "Not that they know of! They're safe enough—and out of the way. I'd go easy, if I was you, cowboy, on talk like that, which might get around and look bad for the cattlemen's committee. One other thing you'll like to hear. Paint and I spent the night in Lingo, from sundown on, and we're here yet. So you'll have to go elsewhere to find out what became of yore nesters, Adams. There's a certain party knows the whole story, if you want to know."

"*You* know, Ticote; you can't come any Lingo alibi on those who were fools enough to trust you to clear the range of the nesters, Hurd!"

"Listen!" The big blond bent forward. "No man ever came that kind of lingo on me before, Adams. I'm not the kind to stand for it. In yore case, I've stood more'n any other man would, for the good of the range. But it ain't any use. It all simmers down to the bone in yore craw—the little lady at the Box A. If you think I'm going to turn my bronc the other way when Judy Arnott rides—"

"Don't drag the lady's name into this, Hurd!"

"Yeah, I will—"

"Will you?" The Diamond Four man's gun had leaped, sat motionless in the flexed hand, muzzle at the big man's eyes. Hurd's bow lips held a sneer.

"You're not shooting a man that won't make a gun play, Adams. That was fast and pretty. But it don't shut my gab on Judy Arnott, till you hear me talk! She's mine, Adams—damn you, she's mine; and if you don't think she is, and you still want to know what happened to that first corral of nesters, go ask her; she knows. That's a test, if you think you stand ace-high with her! Ask Judy Arnott!"

WAIN'S face muscles had frozen into a tense mask, and the gun in his fingers wavered. Fearing for his own self-control if he heard the little cowgirl's name further defiled by the lips of Hurd, with no power to strike at an enemy who would not fight, Wain backed from the room, sheathing his pistol, and walked in a daze through the main saloon to the street.

Tommy Hueber, flinging a gunnysack of provisions on the buckboard, hailed him. "Gosh, Wainey!" His moon eyes were wide. "The 'Nihilators done their stuff, didn't they! Serves them nesters right. The on'y way to handle them is like sheepherders. Wisht I was in on it. Next time yuh do anythin' like that—"

"Watch yore tongue, Tommy! How'd you get the idea I had anything to do with it?"

The puncher winked. "Nobody was in earshot, Wainey. There ain't a man on the range that ain't gettin' drunk t'-day, celebratin' — 'cept nesters. You and Charley and Handsome shore put the fear o' God in them—" He turned, busied himself with his provisions. Wain looked around, to find Marshal Hildebrand standing, hands in pockets.

"See you a minute, Adams? Let's go in here."

Wain followed him into the post office.

"Heard about your gunplay, Monday, at the land opening. Why you have it in for Hurd?"

"Any special reason why I should answer that?"

"Might be. Your truce didn't last long." The officer eyed Wain keenly. "That the hombre you figured on bringing to me for the Derrick killing in three months, Adams?"

"If it was, I wouldn't say so."

"Half a month's gone — better let Hurd alone. He didn't do it. We found that out. Thought I'd mention it."

"Thanks."

"And I'd hate to have to take you in, Adams. I like the way you scrap. You're in a funny fix—still a suspect, and at the same time a detective out of my office. How would you like to extend your activities?"

Wain met his gaze narrowly.

"See what you can find out about that affair last night, and report to me, will you?"

The cowman's jaw hardened. "I

won't," he said bluntly.

Hildebrand laughed easily. "Thought so. If your skirts were clear—"

"They're clear enough."

"Then why not? I'll tell you something. I'm short-handed; someone halted my order for more deputies—sinister influence at work somewhere, higher up. I'm going to find out where, and why."

"How does that interest me?"

"I'll tell you. You're under suspicion—being shadowed, I don't mind telling you—for the Derrick murder. I suspect also you led that raiding party last night and put those six homesteaders out of the way. Those two thing are *suspicious*. Now for the *fact*. I happen to have proof the the man who led the raiders killed the surveyor!"

A strange light flared deep in the cowman's eyes, vanished. "If you have the proof, why don't you move, Hildebrand?"

"Frankly, I don't know his name—only *suspect* it. You might clear yourself, Adams, if you joined us and told us what you know about the personnel of that party."

"How do you know they're one and the same man?"

"It wouldn't do to tell a suspect even that." Hildebrand lit a cigar, puffed on it. "You join us, Adams, and help clear yourself?"

"No. I'm a cattleman, not a government detective."

"I'd jail you to-day, Adams, if I hadn't given you to the first of February to bring in the murderer of Derrick. Better shorten that time considerable."

"I mightn't do it at all, Hildebrand—now. If you think you know yore man, I'd advise you to jail him—pronto."

CHAPTER XXII

The Double Alibi

WAIN ADAMS had not resolved the less to run down the slayer of Derrick when he told the marshal he might not be able to bring him in in the time specified; he merely had determined to make the matter a personal one, in which Hildebrand would have no part, and it would be attended to before the time was up. Wain would not in any sense be a government operative. His reason for this decision was plain — his own tacit oath before the cattlemen that he would hold the organization and personnel of the Annihilators secret. And while Wain ordinarily would not have hesitated to expose the murderer of the surveyor—to lift suspicion from the cattlemen as a whole — he knew from Hildebrand's revelation that to accuse the murderer would be to reveal a secret of the Annihilators, whose leader and the slayer were one and the same man.

Whoever this man was must be dealt with privately and personally. If Hurd were handed over to the authorities by Wain, and accused by them of leading the nester raiders, every cattleman on the Caracara would stamp the Diamond Four man as disloyal and a traitor to his neighbors and his oath.

Hildebrand did not arrest him, in spite of circumstances that seemed to point to the guilt of the little cowman; and the marshal gave no reason, even when Wain had practically abrogated his agreement to deliver the murderer.

Wain rode home in thoughtful mood. At once, when Hildebrand had spoken, the cattleman had marked Hurd down as the slayer of Derrick, in spite of his perfect alibi, for Wain knew he had headed the inner junta of the Annihilators. But he recalled not only Dish Dishawn's assurance that Hurd had stayed at the Old YT, but also Hurd's declaration that he had spent the night of the raid in Lingo. There was no one with whom the Diamond Four owner felt free to talk things over but Old Man Lea, for even his father was being kept in the darkness about the new range troubles.

"It's a strange thing, Murch," Wain said that afternoon, "how a fellow's hunch is often stronger than his reason."

"Shore it is; I always stake my pile on the hunch every time. What's eatin' you?"

"My hunch says Hurd killed Derrick; but he couldn't if Dish Dishawn tells the truth, and Dish isn't a liar."

"Nope. Dish is thruthful as a tally-counted brand."

"And my reason says Ticote led that raid, but my hunch says he has another alibi on that, like he claims."

"Of course he's lyin' about that. Why not you and me check up, both ways? See Dish first; make him repeat about alibi number one—he might have overlooked somethin'. Then see Charley Arnott; he'll tell yuh if Hurd wasn't with 'em last night."

The idea was a good one, the boss concluded, and he acted upon it without delay. Dishawn was found in the Montana, his usual hang-out in the quiet season, and he answered all questions freely. "yo're gettin' yoreself in bad, proddin' Hurd, Wainey. I don't misdoubt yore motives. But Handsome and them three slept all that night in the spare room of my own big house."

"One of them couldn't have slipped out without yore seeing him?"

"Nope, and he didn't."

Next Wain and his foreman rode to the Box A. Arnott was more cordial than on their last meeting, when Hurd was along. "I hate like sin to see yuh buckin' the committee, Wain, without for a second saying you'd violate yore oath, and I hope you'll admit how purty Handsome's little scheme is workin', with all the range yellin' hallelujah. But you and me have been friends and we'll stay friends till you turn over the junta to government spies, which I know you won't ever do!"

"I'm not bucking the committee, Charley. But I'm an interested party, and I've got a right to know what's being done in the name of the cattlemen."

"There's others don't know, either, except we've put the fear of God into a lot of nester hearts. I wasn't along the other night, Wainey." Arnott was serious.

THE little man stared. "You mean you let the whole thing in Ticote's hands?"

"Hurd wasn't with the raiders, either; and nary one of his reg'lar hands. The inner junta was plumb absent." Charley Arnott smiled.

Wain looked his unbelief. "I don't savvy that a bit," he said, puzzled.

"Truth is, Wainey, that job was done for hire by certain men that are holed up not far from Lingo. And every one of the inner junta is clear, in case Hildebrand or the sheriff takes action. And I cain't tell yuh a danged thing more."

Wain exchanged glances with Old Man Lea. Here was the hunch alibi, just as Wain had feared. If Arnott was telling the truth—and his word was unimpeachable—Hurd could not have been the leader of the raiders, who, according to proof in the marshal's possession, also killed Derrick. The Ticote chief had a double alibi, covering both cases.

Who were the strangers who had done the work for hire? Wain knew Arnott would not tell more. On the morning after the disappearance, Pete Slavitik had spoken of a stranger who came into the Maverick with the announcement that the nesters would never come back. Wain had been puzzled over Pete's words at the time.

"Is Miss Judy at home?" queried the Diamond Four owner.

"She's here somewheres—saw you and Murch ridin' in. I'll call her." Arnott started up the stairway. In a moment Wain heard him shouting from the upper gallery. "Go get Judy, Wiggy! There's she's ridin' south. Tell her Wainey's to see her.

Wain swallowed the lump in his throat, realizing she had deliberately ridden away on his arrival. Ever since Handsome Hurd's taunt to him to ask Judy what had become of the banished nesters, Wain had debated whether to put the question to the test. He had decided against it. If she were a party to Hurd's inmost secrets, he would not humiliate himself by risking her scorn. But her act now in avoiding him brought a hot flush to his cheek and stirred his ire. He did not wait for her to return, but mounted, leaving Murch Lea behind, and rode to meet her halfway. He felt troubled.

But when he faced her, her very presence melted the challenging words that had formed in his brain; he felt weak, confused and miserable. His tongue faltered as she halted, erect and graceful in the saddle, an amused smile on her lips.

"What is it, Wain?" she wanted to know.

"Why did you ride away, when you saw me coming, Miss Judy?" he asked doggedly.

"Mercy, why shouldn't I? How should I know you came to see me?"

"It wouldn't have made any difference if you did, I reckon, the way you and Ticote Hurd have been exchanging confidences."

"Mr. Hurd again!"

"Yes, *Mister* Hurd!" The little cowman stiffened. "He says he told you what happened to those nesters."

"Perhaps he did."

"Where are they?"

Her hazel eyes widened. "You wouldn't expect me to betray a confidence, would you? Are you so much concerned over those people? She bit her lip. "Ann Franklin wasn't among them, you know!"

"If you still think that—goodbye!" He wheeled, angry and chagrined, tore through the dust back toward the ranch house and Murch Lea. He realized how he had botched things; he could not have blundered more in following Hurd's advice to ask her to reveal what he had told her under pledge of secrecy. Half way to the ranch house he was sorry he had thus darted away, and would have turned again, but she was riding at a fast lope toward Spanish creek.

Arnott and Murch were discussing matters. The Box A owner beckoned Wain aside. "Murch thinks you got a real kick on bein' let out of things. And mebbeso. I have half a mind to tell you somethin', if it'll make you quit frettin' about yore liability with them nesters." And Arnott looked worried.

"I'm not thinking of *my* liability so much as that of others," affirmed Wain, shortly.

"Well, well, now listen. Them nesters are safe — snug and satisfied. They crossed the Midnights this mornin', for the Dagger country, where Handsome has fixed it they get better claims than these under a new land openin' on his old stampin' ground. Not exactly that they went willin'ly." The cowman grinned. "They had their choice of rottin' in jail in Old Town, or takin' the new claims!"

"Rotting in jail?"

"Yep. A nice little dungeon all prepared for 'em in a 'dobe in Old Town. They rested there till today, when every man accepted his choice to take land elsewhere, preferrin' that to rottin' in jail indefinite. And they know to a man they cain't ever show their faces on the Caracara again, on penalty of bein' shot. Not exactly that I agree with them tactics, but somethin' had to be done, and now it's all jake."

"How did those nesters leave their homesteads without putting up a fight?

ARNOTT scratched his head. "It won't do no harm, now that it's done, and yo're swore to secrecy, anyway, Wainey. Them hired escorts come down on Evans' tent where they was all gathered, ready for battle. Pretendin' to be other nesters, comin' to reinforce the six in the tent, they mixed in with 'em, and first thing the six knowed they was bein' chased down acrost the bosque into Old Town, at 3 o'clock in the mornin'. Look who's comin' up the trail!" He gestured south.

Wain saw Handsome Hurd's large frame on a loping cow-pony, and behind him rode Judy Arnott. When they entered the Box A yard, a glance told him that Judy was not herself; her face was white, lips bloodless. She stepped to the ground first and ran into the house without speaking. Hurd dismounted slowly, glared at Wain Adams and Old Man Lea, beckoned Charley Arnott aside. They spoke in low tones for some minutes.

"Somethin' has shore pop went wrong!" the foreman muttered out of the corner of his mouth. Wain nodded, watched the pair. Hurd raised his voice. "They're bringin' the bodies into the Lingo." He looked around toward the Diamond Four men. "I reckon we might as well tell 'em, they'll find it out anyway."

He moved slowly forward toward Wain Adams, hands thrust into the pockets of his linsey coat. His green-gray eyes were on the little man, with sinister intentness. "Adams," he said, in quiet, musical tones "Charley has told you how we took those six nesters into Old Town and gave them their choice of leaving for the Dagger Country or staying under lock and key. They started this morning. Half way across, in Loco pass, one of 'em started shooting, having concealed a gun, and the whole bunch lit into their guards. There was a battle, and the whole six died." He paused, and his eyes held a threat of death. Wain knew his meaning, for he saw the shapes of two small gun muzzles outlined in the forward corners of the pockets of the linsey coat.

"Now, Adams, the point is, the whole thing was an accident, and we're innocent of taking nester blood. But it won't look that way in the eyes of the law, every man of the whole committee having acted to hire these guards. Do you savvy? And that puts you in the same

drive herd with the rest of us. Are you burying the hatchet, to stick with the committee, every man, including me, or are you going to continue to stir up trouble?" His unwinking gaze held the cold venom of the diamond-back.

"Charley," Wain said quietly, without removing his eyes from the big blond, "this hombre has a brace of guns drawn on me, in the pockets of this coat—likely thirty-eights. If he shoots, without an even break, you'll know it's murder, and you'll know the calibre of man that's heading the cattleman to ruin. But I'm going to answer him. Hurd, you killed those men, hired them to be butchered. My tongue is sealed, for the good of the cowmen who are innocent. But I'm going to make you pay, Ticote, if you use those hidden guns, or if you don't." He drew out the makings for a cigarette, then:

"Take yore choice, Hurd. Convict yoreself of the murderer you are before Charley Arnott by killing me without a draw—and that'll save Charley and the rest from further crimes of yours—or take off yore coat so Murch and Charley can see it, now, and we'll talk gun to gun!"

The big man's eyes wavered; his bow lips drew into a snarl. "Fighting words, Adams; you've lost yore reason, over the lady! I won't fight you here, where she stands in the doorway, and where you and yore foreman are teamed against one. I'm riding." He went backward, swept to the saddle. "Our trails will cross again, and only once!"

"On sight?"

"On sight!"

CHAPTER XXIII

The Mythical Names

"NOW you went and done it, Wain!" Charley Arnott shook his bushy head, squinted after the departing Ticote cowman. "At a time like this, when we're in one H of a jackpot, for you and Handsome to be gunnin' for each other is bad—bad. Why cain't yuh give him the benefit of a iota of a doubt, if yuh cain't agree with us that knows he's innocent of any intentional wrong-doin'? Yuh don't believe he was coyote enough to have them nesters killed, do yuh?"

The Diamond Four man gazed at Arnott for a long moment. "You mean to tell me you don't believe it?" he demanded incredulously.

"Shore. Whad he gain by it? Why, he'd be a fool to trap hisself in a thing like that. There's goin' to be bally hell over this, Wainey! I know Hurd, better'n you do—he pulled me out of a tight hole with his welcome money, without even me askin—but it ain't that! I've been workin' with him, clost, on this thing, and know every move—them four hired gunmen from the Daggers done that on their own, or I'm a sheepherder. Ain't that right, Judy?" The daughter had come slowly over from the house, on Hurd's departure, still pale and wide-eyed.

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know! Something terrible is going to come from this." Her glance went to Wain, whose acceptance of the duel challenge she had heard. "Now it will be worse than ever, with you two out to kill each other! I don't believe he had guns concealed in his pockets, Wain; you didn't see them; how could you tell?"

"Yeah," put in Arnott, "I couldn't see no pistol shapes, Wainey. Where'd you get that coat idee, anyway; you made him take it off at Providence — and nothin' came of it."

The little cowman smiled grimly, checked further accusation of his rival in the latter's absence. "Everybody is entitled to his opinion; I made my talk to Hurd direct. You know he's lily white, and we'll let it ride that way till the facts come out. Murch, we'd better ride."

They proceeded to the Diamond Four.

Meanwhile Handsome Hurd jogged down the long street of Lingo, oblivious of the excited groups gathered here and there to discuss the finding of the bodies of the six nesters. At the Lingo bank he swung down leisurely and strolled unhurriedly through the door and into Barry Berg's private office. Barry followed within a few moments and closed the door.

"Donder!" grunted Berg, in low tones. "I never t'ought it vould be as bad as dot—six!"

Hurd smiled reassuringly. "The worse, the better—for us, Barry! From now on, there won't be a claim we want that

we don't get. In a week we clear a bunch more from those river quarter sections, and it won't be necessary to take a nester off. They'll leave, when they get their notices!"

Berg frowned. "There iss danger! The marshal—the sheriff—I don't know, Handsomer. And anyway, the claims are not vort as much as the ranch broberties—that is where the big agreage iss, Handsomer!"

"Sure. And those dead nesters will hand over the Diamond Four, the Box A and the rest, before we're through. At the same time those hundred and sixties aren't to be sneezed at—under irrigation! That first six-nigh a thousand acres in all—are already properly entered with dummies in the land office. More'll be entered from time to time, as the nesters pulls stakes—Bingo Goodman's looking after that little detail for us. Now how about those checks? You make a memo of them?"

"Yes, but I don'd see—"

"I'll tell you, so you'll get the drift. I explained those five names are fictitious—supposed roughnecks we hired to hustle the nesters off. There are no such hired men. I cashed the checks, as you know, signing the fake names, and you made a memo of them. All right. See any sense in that play?"

Bewilderment registered on the banker's flabby countenance.

"When the time comes, you've got the proof that Charley Arnott, Bittick, Dishawn and Burman paid those so-called assassins to do the work, savvy?" Berg stared his astonishment.

"And dot's vhy you didn't sign any of them yourself!"

THE Ticote man grinned.

"But how dit you ever induce them to sign?"

"Easy. I put it up to the committee to back me up, by each paying his quota, including myself—made the talk that if they were square they wouldn't put the whole criminal responsibility on me, if anything happened. There's only five big outfits we want. Barry—Diamond Four, Box A, Old YT, Lazy K and Seven Bar X—all on the creek ready for the dam. We'll pry the last four loose, when the time comes and I spring my big play."

"But how about Diamond Four? It iss the best of all, vid the cañoncita for the dam!"

Handsome Hurd lit a cigarette, puffed it rapidly. "We've struck a snag in Adams, Barry—and that's why he didn't have a check. I knew better'n to ask him. I'll tell you something." He bent his huge torso forward.

"That little coyote is half way wise, Barry! The other day he shot something at me about me working with a boomer and a banker—"

"A panker!" Berg's pudgy figure bounded from the chair. "Vhere dit he ever get such a idee as dot!" He paced back and forth, wringing his fat hands.

"Never mind, you're safe, Barry!" Hurd chuckled. "So am I. When there's an arrest made, it'll be Arnott, Bittick, Dishawn and Burman—"

"And Adams—"

"No." The cowman's face darkened. "We got to get that hombre before we close in all around—or we might not make our play. He knows too much. But leave *that* to me." He rose abruptly.

"But—" Berg held out his fat hands. "But you say dose strangers are all fictitious. Who vas the von who come to the Maverick in the morning?"

Hurd laughed easily. "A hobo. Picked him off the train, gave him a five-spot to walk in and say those dozen words and disappear. Gives countenance to our layout about the hired men doing the killing."

"My goodness, but you have a pig brain on you, Handsomer!" His protruding eyes stared in dumb admiration. "Just like ven you figured dot alibi—sleebing at my house dot night, and slipping oud in the mittle of it! I bet me even Charley Arnott don'd know!"

"You win. Charley swallowed my talk about us letting the hired gunmen do it, establishing an alibi for all of us!" He laughed loudly. Berg raised a finger to his lips, gestured in alarm toward the lobby. Marshal Hildebrand had entered.

Hurd rose. "Watch my next play. He's the hombre I'm looking for. Sit still." He opened the glass door, called to Hildebrand. As the latter strode up through the unpretentious wood-wainscoting lobby, Hurd ushered him into the office.

"It ain't any of my business, marshal, but any clews in the nester business?"

"Some."

"Look promising?"

"I'm not sayin'."

"Reason I ask is I wondered if you would handle it or the sheriff, it being on the sheriff's province."

"Both workin' on it."

"What's it look like to you?" asked Hurd.

"Me? Oh, what would be your guess, Hurd?"

"Talk's everywhere it's the cattlemen."

"Yeah?"

"Point is, I'm planning on a little trip, to-night, starting over Ticote way. If there's anything I could do for you before leaving—"

"Leaving, eh?"

"For a couple weeks. Had a hunch—I'm speaking frankly, Hildebrand—had a hunch you might want to question some of us cattlemen that's been more or less at outs with nesters. How much money I got on deposit here, Barry?"

Berg sat up with a jerk, tried to fathom whether Hurd wanted a true answer. He risked it. "Twenty-one thousand dollars."

"Reason I wanted you to know, Marshal, is that a man with that money in the bank wouldn't be digging out, no matter how it might look on the heels of the murders. You understand."

HILDEBRAND nodded.

"So if there's any questions—"

"Don't know of any, Hurd."

"Fine. Thought you might want some light on the bunch signing themselves the Annihilators — ones that drove the nesters out."

"No. Reckon I've got enough, Hurd."

Barry Berg exchanged an uneasy glance with the Ticote cowman. "Dose gattlemen are garrying things too far," he put in promptingly. "The pank has alvays stood vit them, but—"

He looked quickly at Handsome.

Handsome Hurd rose, hands on the edge of the flat-top desk, faced the marshal. "I want to lay my cards on the table, Hildebrand, before I make this trip!"

The other stroked his smooth-shaven, square chin. "Yeah?"

"Yes! I've been afraid of this thing from the start—been fighting it. You know my position, being an owner myself. They'd pot me quick as they potted these nesters if they thought I might reveal the names of that committee!"

"Course you won't," drawled Hildebrand.

"Not unless I'm granted immunity if anything comes of it, Marshal." Hurd's lips curved to a smile.

"I'm in no position to promise immunity, Hurd. You know the usual court procedure in such cases. Don't commit yourself too far."

"I won't. Nothing to hide, on my part, anyway. I reckon you know Diamond Adams and I have been at outs? That's one reason. I've bucked him from the start—him and Arnott, Bittick, Burman and Dishawn—withdrew from their junta soon's I saw what Adams was driving the thing into. That's how I stand, before I start for Ticote on pressing business."

"Interesting, Hurd. No, I don't think you'll be under suspicion because you leave, Mister Hurd. That all you had on your conscience?"

"That's all—except—" He looked at Barry Berg. "Barry, I reckon you better tell Mister Hildebrand what you was mentioning to me, about those checks."

The banker coughed nervously; his heavy forehead contracted with laborious thought. "Vell," he said finally, catching Hurd's eye, "I gashed some checks for strangers a few days ago, and I merely t'ought—"

"It's this way, Marshal," broke in the cowman, brusquely, "I don't think for a minute Adams, Arnott and the others killed those nesters, direct. That was hired work. You found out about a stranger being in town making talk the morning after the disappearance? Well, that's a real clue, looks to me. Point is, these checks might mean something."

Hildebrand slowly drew out a tiny notebook. "You might give me the names on those checks, if you have 'em." He addressed Berg.

Barry was gone, and returned in haste. "I marked 'em down, begause they were strangers!" He rolled his eyes. "Henry Bickers, Les Manford, Pete House, William Jolly!"

"Thanks. Who signed 'em?"

"In order they vas signed by Nafe Bittick, Charley Arnott, Henry Burman and John Dishawn."

"Amount?"

"Eighty dollars each."

"Adams not among 'em?"

"No, he wasn't." Berg stroked his cheek.

Handsome Hurd made a wry face. "He's the brains of the junta, marshal. Got sense enough not to sign checks that a man like Berg might notice and make him swing for. The others don't think fast as that kid owner does!"

"That's all?"

"Yeah, I believe it is. Hope you get enough help to run the killers down, Hildebrand. I've known gunmen and man-slayers in my time, but butchering them in bunches—" He made a gesture of disgust and revulsion at so hideous a crime.

When the marshal had sauntered out, the Ticote man turned to Berg.

"How's that?"

"It iss—eggselant!"

"Funny part of it is," droned the big blond, "I'm holing up for a couple weeks right on the Double Spur. That whole play of me and my men leaving was made for a purpose. We'll ride as far as the Midnights, then double back. When more nesters get notices to leave —and they'll hike, too—folks will all know how Handsome, Paint, Pinky and Gandara didn't have a damn thing to do with it, being plumb out of the country. Savvy?"

BERG'S eyes popped. "Vonderful! Handsomer, you are vitout doud the smartest man dot ever was a gustomer at my pank!"

"One thing more it won't hurt you to know, Barry. Hildebrand is slow; and he won't arrest that bunch right off. It didn't hurt any to put a bug in his ear about Adams — but even if that little runt is arrested, the proof against him is weaker'n it is on those others. He's too dangerous to be walking around another minute than's necessary. The chief reason I implicated him in the murder before Hildebrand was that when we pot him there won't be a fuss, even if a slip-up shows who fired the shot. It'll be a good riddance of a nester butcher, in the opinion of the law!"

"My golly, Handsomer, it iss unbelieffable, how you figure oud all dot. And ven vill dot upstart that poked a gun into my face be—be assissinatened? Vat aboud serving him vit a notice, like you blanned?"

"We can't wait for that, now, Barry! He'll be bait for buzzards, pronto, and his old man that's sick can't meet those notes he made you sign. Diamond Four will be ours at the price of those notes. When the old man has to meet 'em, there won't be any chattel stock left."

"Whew! How—?"

"Paint and me and the others will be busy, while holed up, Barry. We'll clean the Diamond Four stock—everything's ready for a big drive to Ticote when he cashes in! Then you take the land for the notes, savvy?"

"It iss too much for me to garry in my headt!"

"Then leave it to me."

They went out to join the throng gathered in the street as six bodies were hauled into Harry Bangor's general merchandise store and back-room mortuary. Rumors were rife among the cowboys that a dozen head of cattle, on several ranches, had been wantonly slaughtered—quietly knife-slain by nesters.

CHAPTER XXIV

Ambush

WAIN ADAMS did not go to Lingo that day or the next, in spite of Handsome Hurd's threat to shoot him on sight, rather than because of it. He knew how it would look if he did not leave the Diamond Four, for Hurd was not the kind of man to keep the final showdown in the feud quiet. But Wain knew also that if the two should meet and fight it out, and Hurd were slain, the proof would still be lacking that the Ticote man had killed Derrick. Wain must in some way learn definitely from Hildebrand whether a thirty-eight calibre gun had killed the surveyor; then he must meet Hurd when he had such a gun on his person—a task that was no easy one. In that way only could the Diamond Four man clear himself of the Derrick crime.

He did not go to town to see Hildebrand for the reason that Tommy Hueber had found out that the marshal would be absent for two or three days. Tommy brought him news of the day in Lingo when the bodies were shipped out

to West River, on instructions from the coroner and the sheriff. Lingo had been quiet and undemonstrative, in spite of the crowds who watched the bodies come and go. Homesteaders were numerous, but they were orderly, conversing in low tones among themselves. Cowpunchers and townsfolk whispered, and picked no quarrels, even with nesters.

Tuesday morning Old Man Lea went to town. He returned late in the afternoon with a budget of news. "First off, Wainey, the Ticote bunch has plumb flew the country."

Wain's eyes narrowed. "How long? Where'd they go?"

"Last night, and nobody knows. Arnott says they're off on business, and will be back in two-three weeks. Charley and me rode to the forks together. Them fool neighbors of ours still thinks Hurd is on the level—they're a little scairt at what them hired gunmen done, but think Handsome's hands is clean. You cain't augur them into anything else."

"We won't. I doubt Hurd will stay away, Murch; he's got too much at stake."

"What's his play, anyway?"

"I don't know. Only guesswork. But there's a lot of things, Murch, that dovetail together. Bingo Goodman, Barry Berg and Hurd are working at something, if I know anything. I haven't figured it yet. Wait till I see Hildebrand. Is he back?"

"I seen him this noon, with that deputy, Henry Derrick."

Wain saddled his bronco immediately. "I want to see the marshal, then you and I will have a job this evening, Murch. Be at the Montana around seven-thirty." He rode toward the creek trail, ran across the carcass of a knife-stuck cow.

As he emerged from the bosque opposite the homestead section occupied by the Meiggs and McKim families and Ann and William, he drew up short at sight of a struggling girl in the swollen, muddy waters of the creek. Instantly he shook out his rope, spurted to the bank. In another minute he had pulled the dripping, chilled young woman to safety.

"Trying to commit suicide?"

"No." Ann Franklin's teeth chattered. "I was going to your r-ranch. I am a good swimmer, but this water is too swift and c-cold."

"You'd better get to a fire and dry yourself, ma'am, or you'll get pneumonia. I'll carry you back. What did you want at the Box A?" His face hardened a trifle.

"Oh, I came to beg—not for myself! I tried to get work, in Lingo and Providence, but couldn't. We're out of things, and William can't stand going longer without something nourishing. The McKims and Meiggs are low, too, and I didn't have the courage to ask them; they're working on a dam, and will have just enough to get through. They warned me you were the ringleader of those robbers and murderers, the Annihilators—that is, all but Mrs. McKim. She says you're not that kind. Personally I won't take a thing from you, but I'm asking for a little for William—he is very ill, Mr. Adams!" She wrung the yellow water from her clinging skirt.

"You got a fire in that tent of yours?"

"Yes, I've been nursing William there. We took his tarp and built up the sides."

"I'LL carry you back. Dry yoreself. before you get sick, too. Climb up; he'll make it double. No, I reckon she's too deep." He stepped down, helped her up. Knotting his rope to the reins, he placed them in her hands, slapped the bronco's flanks gently, and horse and girl waded. In two minutes they were across and Wain, holding the long hempen leash, drew the cow-horse back. He mounted and rode the mile back to the ranch, obtained a quarter of beef, spuds, flour, honey and some newly-made corn bread from the cook-house and started for the homestead.

This time he struck the creek higher, for better fording, and saw two teams at work. Puzzled, he took the time to ride up, where Ab McKim and hairy Jake Meiggs were dragging a scraper and hauling riverbank clay into the edge of the stream. They eyed him suspiciously, sullenly. Without asking questions, Wain turned back, took the creosote-bush flats and rode to the nester tent of Ann Franklin.

He threw down his gunnysack of provisions on the outside. Ann appeared. "Thanks," she said simply, "for William's sake." Through the tent flap Wain saw the emaciated form of Crabtree, on a blanket.

"Where do you get yore water?"

"Mr. Meiggs hauls it from the railroad. We'll soon have plenty, when he drills a well. Then when the little dam is finished, we'll have water to irrigate."

"Those men plan to span that creek?"

"No, they're only diverting part of the water, from the south side, enough for barley and alfalfa. Mr. McKim is buying cows; we'll be able to feed them and have butter and milk, besides vegetables. If we can stick it out, and William improves in this dry climate—"

"He will; best place in the world for lungs, ma'am. How much you say Goodman owes you?"

"Fifty dollars apiece."

Wain took the south side of the creek toward Lingo, passing the six claims from which the nesters had been driven, and others farther east. This brought him into Old Town, a squat, scattering hamlet of two dozen adobe houses and jacal shacks. In one of these adobes he knew the slain nesters had been taken that first night. He rode up and down the winding street and plaza, but saw no house that looked as though it contained a basement that might serve as a safe dungeon.

He crossed the creek into Lingo and proceeded to Providence, and into the newly-built eight-by-ten office of Bingo Goodman, containing the placard: "Investments and Relinquishments." Goodman swept his patent-leather shoes from the desk where they had been propped, glared at the little cowman of unpleasant memory.

"Got a hundred dollars on you, Goodman?"

"No, what the—?"

"Then write a check." Wain glided into the chair opposite him.

"I'll do neither!" The boomer's black eyes contracted. "What kind of a game —?"

"Write!" The cowman's big forty-five raised, glowered menacingly at the locator's head.

"B-but—"

"Write. Fifty to Ann Franklin, fifty to William Crabtree, or hand me the hundred, pronto!"

Bingo Goodman gulped, fished into his hip pocket, counted out five twenties.

"Adiós!"

Half an hour later the Diamond Four man tapped the shoulder of Marshal Hildebrand in the Maverick saloon. The two went to one of the unoccupied card tables at the far end of the room.

"I've got to know something," said the cowman, earnestly. "What calibre gun killed Derrick?"

The marshal's penetrating eyes focussed sharply. "Don't *you* know, Adams? Or are you just trying to find out if I suspect?"

"Neither. If it was a thirty-eight, I know the murderer, Hildebrand."

The marshal's lean hands went to the little man's two shoulders, pulled him around squarely. "I'll tell you that, if you answer a question of mine. How did you, Arnott, Burman, Bittick, Dishawn, Hurd and the rest come to pick such a highfallutin' name as the Annihilators?" He smiled meaningly.

WAIN met his gaze evenly, without betraying the shock that Hildebrand's revelation had given him—that the secret of the committee's personnel was out, known to the law and the authorities. The question who had revealed that secret raced through his brain as he made evasive reply in seeking to put off the marshal.

"Yore guess mightn't be as accurate as you figure it is, Mister Hildebrand."

"Didn't exactly expect you to answer that," grinned the marshal. "Now, if I say it was a thirty-eight, will you *name* the hombre that shot Derrick?"

"I won't *name* him." There was the chance that Hildebrand had ventured a wild guess and hit the mark, in which event the Diamond Four man was still bound by his oath not to reveal the secrets of the junta. "But I'll do better. I'll tell you where to send the coroner."

"Shoot him?"

Wain nodded grimly.

"You aiming to commit suicide, Adams?"

The cowman frowned. "I've made my proposition. Take it, or leave it."

"I wouldn't encourage you to go out and kill a man, Adams, *any more men,* if you're what I think you are!" The marshal fingered his plain black tie. "Now, if you'll agree to shoot only in self-defense—"

"He'll have a chance to go for his *thirty-eight.*"

The marshal's eyes glinted. "You're an actor, Adams! Almost got me convinced you're working with me, as chief

of the Annihilators." His jaw set. "It won't do any special harm for you to know, I suppose, that Derrick *was* killed by a thirty-eight bullet. Now watch your step, little man, because I'm not many, but I'm going to land the last of your junta in the penitentiary or on the gallows. Tell 'em that. And the sheriff, too, if you want to!"

Wain's expression did not change as he left the saloon; he wondered if the marshal had an object in revealing so much; Hildebrand was not ordinarily talkative. Could he have expected Wain to tell Arnott and the others, then watch their actions, perhaps hoping they would come to him with their alibis and reveal the guilty ones? If Hildebrand had the positive evidence he hinted, why did he not take the junta into custody? Wain did not know; he looked at his watch, saw he would have time to eat before Murch Lea was due at the Montana.

As he entered the Hungry Dog lunchroom and departed fifteen minutes later he did not see the two pairs of eyes that watched his every move from behind the drawn shades of the bank. He loitered a few minutes in the Montana until Old Man Lea appeared, then they went out and mounted. It was growing dark when they turned their horses toward Providence.

Bingo Goodman rode behind, at a safe distance.

At Providence they turned off south, toward lower Spanish Creek and the Double Spur. Wain explained his purpose. "The Ticote bunch being away, I want to see who's running things at Hurd's Ranch. We'll go straight up and see what the horse wrangler knows and take a look at any other hands—reckon they'll be strangers and the ones who know about that butchery."

"Suits me. Hildebrand explain anything?"

"A mite. You're sure as I am, Murch, that Handsome Hurd had guns in his pockets at the Box A?"

"He proved it hisself, by refusin' to show them pockets when yuh accused him, Wainey! I'd say they wasn't four-fives, but they sure was guns."

"Maybe thirty-eights—like that bullet that nigh clipped me some time back at the Diamond Four? I know it, Murch, now, from what Tipton wrote, from what happened to Bill—killed by a thirty-eight, Bill was—and from what Hildebrand says, Derrick died from a little bullet like that."

"Yeah," murmured the veteran, doubtfully, "but Hurd drawed off his coat in Providence; he didn't have any hardware."

"After killing Derrick, he'd likely lay aside that little gun for a spell, wouldn't he — figuring Hildebrand might frisk him, while he was grilling all of us? What I can't make out is why the marshal never went through my hip pockets."

"His eyes is sharp, and he seen you didn't have any, a-plenty."

THEY lapsed into silence, followed the swollen waters of the creek through mistletoe-laden cottonwoods, seeking the screen of the bosque to make doubly sure of privacy. This trail was longer than the open road that offered the hazard of greater starlight. Their act in taking it gave Bingo Goodman his opportunity to cut off a mile in reaching the Double Spur, which he did some five minutes before the two others.

"Nary a light," murmured Old Man Lea, as they jogged up the darkened trail into the old parada grounds. "What'll we do?"

"Want to risk it, Murch?" He nodded.

"We'll go up and see who's who, while Ticote's gone."

Wain and his foreman turned their horses into the shadows and moved toward the house. The very silence about the place seemed ominous to the Diamond Four owner, for at least the horses must be fed, requiring the presence of at least one man.

Suddenly spurting jets of flame and the crash of guns woke the silence, from both sides of the tree avenue. Wain's horse toppled as his hand swept toward his holster and he saw Old Man Lea crumple in the saddle, groan and pitch downward.

CHAPTER XXV

Mixed Brands

EVEN as Wain Adams slid from his dying horse between the two rows of dark umbrella trees, where an instant before he had seen Old Man Lea pitch downward into the road-

way, he fired once, at the spot marked by the forward puff of fire, and again, as his feet reached the ground—this time at the spot where the other had fired, as nearly as he could judge it. Then as his body struck the dust, prone, where he had instinctively hurled himself, the attackers gave answer.

But, as his swift, almost unconscious thought processes had calculated, the lead of the ambush guns went high. In the part of a second marked by the lull that followed, his quick comprehension told him the odds were too great for any one man, with foes on either side. The first burst of fire had told him how cleverly the attackers had planned their position—they had waited until he and Murch had gone forward beyond them a dozen or fifteen feet, to prevent their own crossfire from taking toll among themselves; their shots had crossed at an angle.

In the same brief interval he realized his own fire had gone astray; the gunmen, with experience in night shooting, had undoubtedly held their weapons wide from the hip, counting on a return attack if they failed in the darkness. On the instant, accepting the hopelessness of felling invisible gun-fighters on either side, his brain acted. With his face still close to the ground, he sang out exuberant words:

"Come on, Hildebrand! We've got 'em!"

Uncanny silence ensued for perhaps half a second; then he heard a muttered oath, scraping spur chains, and the hollow, clicking sound of trotting boots, on either side. Up the roadway fifty or sixty feet he heard a whispered command and the sound of saddle leather, as the mysterious forces of the Double Spur mounted. There was a subdued tattoo of horses' hoofs in the dust, and all fell silent. The ruse had worked.

Whoever these men were, they feared the marshal and the unknown number of deputies with him more than they desired to bag their quarry, as Wain had calculated when he uttered his fanciful call. The Diamond Four man had reached the side of Old Man Lea; in mingled fear and agony he felt of him, leaned close. His heart thrilled as Murch's frame heaved and his panted words came: "I'm a goner, Wainey; look out for yoreself."

"Not a goner, Murch. Where?"

"In th' chest. Take my hoss—ride!"

Wain struck a match, pulled back the flannel shirt, saw the small black hole near where shoulder and chest divide; there was little surface bleeding, which meant nothing. He thought swiftly; if the lung were pierced it would not do to lay Murch across the saddle as he had often laid a calf and once a less grievously wounded man; the jolting might start or aggravate a hemorrhage. A wagon might be almost as bad, even if one were obtainable. He thought of the Indian method. There was no time to lose; the assailants might return. He left the wounded man, struck out for the corrals.

In five minutes he had dragged up two cedar poles, lashed them to the saddle of Murch's horse, using the reins and rope from his own lifeless mount. Both saddle blankets he laid across the drag and roped them. Then he lifted the veteran into the litter, arms under a stretch of rope. The bronco that ordinarily would have kicked such a contraption into the umbrella trees, seemed to understand the need perfectly, and Wain took the saddle and walked the animal slowly out of the driveway and onto the dust-cushioned trail.

AVOIDING Lingo, he guided the travois directly overland the three miles to the neighboring Seven Bar X. Nafe Bittick had once studied to be a doctor; he was roused out of bed near midnight, examined Murch, and said the chances were better than ever.

"Leave him here; in the morning we'll get Doc Ferrell, but he can't do any more than we'll do. How'd it happen?"

Wain hesitated; Bittick had been one of Hurd's strongest partisans in the committee. But the truth must out. "We rode over to the Double Spur to see who was running things while the Ticote bunch was gone. They dry-gulched us."

"Dang near served you right; glad, though, it didn't come out worse. You better roll in here for the night." It was said something grudgingly.

"I'll do it, to help Murch."

In the morning Wain brought out Doctor Ferrell from his home two miles west of Lingo; Ferrell said the foreman had a fair chance and could be moved.

"Look at this." He held a smooth bullet between thumb and forefinger. "Un-

der a back rib. Blamed if it's not a .38, first I ever took out of a man in this country!"

"Give it to Mister Adams, Doc," grunted Old Man Lea, in weak voice.

"Yeah, I'd like it." Wain gazed on the exhibit with intent interest.

"After we see how this comes out." Ferrell hustled out of the house and rode west.

Murch's keen gray eyes met those of his doughty little boss. Wain read the question in them. After Bittick left the room Murch couldn't keep still.

"Somethin' funny. Us countin' on Hurd bein' the only packer of one them toys—and now when he's out of town I'm branded with this. Danged if it ain't ridic'lous. What's the range comin' to. Thirty-eights!" He sniffed.

"Better not talk, and excite yoreself, Murch. Yeah, it kind of mixes our brands — right after we thought the thirty-eight was sure-enough Ticote's own."

He thought of his talk with Hildebrand; his whole course of action had been prompted by the belief that the small calibre gun would prove the clue to the surveyor's assassin. But if another man were using that kind of weapon, or two of them, were doing so, it was a different story.

"Either Hurd's brand ain't a thirty-eight," said Murch, "or he was at that party last night. I know Ticote had toy guns in his coat pocket—"

"We'll talk that over later, when you're stronger." Wain went out, to spare the patient, and strode back and forth on the gallery. "Can't be two fools using a thirty-eight on the range," he argued with himself. "And don't believe Hurd's here; he wouldn't give it out he left, rousing suspicion against himself after these killings, if he was going to be here."

In the afternoon Old Man Lea was driven home to the Diamond Four in a wagon. A light rain fell in the evening, and Wain rode through the inky blackness to the Double Spur alone. The old house was dark and absolutely deserted, as were the men's quarters.

Two sunny November days followed. News of the shooting of Lea had traveled; report in town said the junta had fallen out; Arnott, Bittick and the rest knew better, or thought they did, believing the shooting had been done by the mythical hired gunmen. Wain was puzzled at Hildebrand's inactivity, in spite of the marshal's threat to arrest the men whose names he had.

Tuesday morning Trig Malone rode up from the creek with information that several of the nesters were packing their traps. In the excitement of the last few days Wain had completely forgotten about the money he had collected from Bingo Goodman. He saddled hastily.

"You goin' to pack any more grub to nesters?" queried the gossipy Malone.

"You better draw yore pay, Trig."

"I didn't mean no harm, Wainey!" whined the puncher.

"All right; watch your talk in future."

THE little cowman forded the creek where Meiggs and McKim were at work on the tiny dam. They had got a core of impervious clay and rock two-thirds across, protected by rip-rapping from the passing waters. Three other teams were at work, from farther down, co-operating for a share of the water that was to be raised and diverted. Filling in was being done on both sides of the core. Wain sat watching for a time, then went on to the claim of Ann Franklin. Crabtree was up and around; the girl had gone to town.

"Here's yore location money." Wain gave him the hundred dollars. "Keep that beef hanging; it'll dry in this climate."

"I know it! You're a prince, cowboy! If it wasn't for you—say! Some of those fellers below us were ordered out last night, and are going into town today to take the train tomorrow."

"How many of 'em?" asked Wain quickly.

"Don't know, but one of them had a team helping out with the dam, and he wouldn't stay a minute longer; won't even sleep on his claim tonight." His deep-set eyes burned strangely. "Do you think those—those cattlemen will make us leave?"

"It's hard to tell," replied Wain gravely.

"This climate's making me well," declared William. "With this rain, Ann says she's going to dry-farm and raise enough hay to feed some dairy stock and beef. It can be done, she says, merely by

breaking up the surface with a harrow, and cultivating it several times, conserving the moisture until the crop is safe. Then we'll have a little water from the dam, as soon as the canal is in. It's great—and a thousand thanks for the provisions and this hundred dollars. Did Goodman give it over willingly?"

"Willingly enough." Wain grinned and rode on down the creek. He discovered that the latest nesters to be banished occupied river land. A litter of odds and ends remained at several of the claims; the nesters had tried to sell some of their bulkier acquisitions to neighbors and failed, a nester scavenger said.

Wednesday morning, when the train left Providence, eight homesteaders went with it—baggage-laden, money-short, but wiser. Two others went overland by team.

Then on the very heels of the unresisting flight another bunch of indefinite number received the warning of the Annihilators. They left the Caracara on the day before Thanksgiving.

"You can't say things ain't movin' like clockwork now, Wainey," grunted Charley Arnott, one day in the post office. "Even when Handsome, Paint, Pink and Gandara are plumb acrost the Midnights. Nesters won't kill many more cows."

"You and Nafe and the rest serve those notices, Charley?"

"Nary one. Them hired hands. I don't like 'em, but they're deliverin' the goods, and we're done if the nesters don't dust. I'd hate to cross 'em, like you're doin', Wain, boy!" The Diamond Four owner had been sleuthing about the Double Spur for three days straight, and Arnott knew it. "Glad Murch is gettin' all right again. See here." He extended a postcard.

It was dated Ticote, bore the postmark of that desert hamlet, was signed "Hurd," and announced that the bunch would be back in Lingo Saturday. Hurd's little band had actually spent the last three days there, hence Wain had not encountered them at the Double Spur on recent visits.

"Now that things are workin' slick, Wain, I'd like yuh to bury yore grouch and come to the meetin' Saturday night at my house. I'll speak to Handsome—he's big-hearted—and you two can forget that shoot-on-sight notion. What say?"

"Don't speak to Hurd, Charley," said the little cowman, grimly.

Arnott's eyes glinted. "Reckon you better not show up, Wain, 'less you're willin' to talk peace with Ticote—" He cut off short at the approach of Marshal Hildebrand.

"I'd like to see you, Arnott." The marshal paid no attention to Wain, who sauntered out into the street.

CHAPTER XXVI

Maddened Waters

WAIN had mentioned to Old Man Lea the receipt of the postcard by Arnott announcing Hurd's return. Saturday morning, when the Diamond Four owner was saddling up, Murch was sitting in the early sunshine on the gallery. He called his boss to him.

"I've been thinkin' a lot since that little bullet ventilated me, Wainey. Now comes this postal cyard. You ever notice that big Ticote boy is long on fixin' up alibis?"

"I've noticed it, more'n once."

"Strikes me like that trip over the Midnights has that tilt to it. Why'd he leave when things was hot? He knowed that would be suspicious. Bet he fixed it with Hildebrand to go. Bet he never went, on'y for long enough to mail that cyard!"

Wain grinned; he had thought along that line himself. "Why?" he asked.

"He was there t'other night, Wainey, when we rode into the Double Spur. Ain't another man in the cow country uses a thirty-eight. He on'y does it for a special reason, because it's his hidden gun. Wisht I could go to town along, Wainey," he added, wistfully. "Watch his coat—clost."

"I aim to."

"You was sayin' Hildebrand talked with Arnott. That looks bad—knowin' like we do that Hildebrand has them names. I'd hate to see arrests, right at this time. Look who's comin' up the old round-up trail!" He gestured south.

Ann Franklin was striding her graceful long step toward the Diamond Four grounds. This time her skirts were dry, she had come by way of the nester's

earthen dam, which had actually spanned the creek. She carried a rifle. Wain tightened the cinches, frowning slightly, hoping she was not coming to thank him for the money.

"We've been ordered to leave," she said, halting, extending a square of cardboard signed by the Annihilators. "You have been good to us. Mr. Meiggs declares you are a spy of the cattlemen, but I know better. I'm going to fight; tell 'em that! Fight for William and our claims, for his health's sake—if not a man sticks." She reached for the cardboard, which Wain had noted contained the same lettering as the previous notices. Holding it up, she tore it into bits. "Tell those fellows, if you know them, exactly what I think of 'em!"

Wain Adams stirred uneasily, looked at Murch. The veteran was grinning.

"Why did you come to me?" demanded Wain, sharply.

"You were the nearest cowman; you can carry the news. That's all." She turned on her heel.

"If you came for advice, I'd say you and William would be better off away from that homestead, ma'am." But she was heedless; went her way.

Murch was chuckling; only the pain in his chest made him stop. "I wouldn't told her that, Wainey! Dang me, I admire huh spunk. If them coyotes told me to dust—what's that mean?" Wain was holding up one of the torn bits of the notice.

"Proof of yore theory, Murch! Hurd's out of town. But that writing is the same that was on those first notices! Either he came back last night, or wasn't gone at all, but mailed that postal to a friend in Ticote and had him mail it back."

"Shore's shootin'. I got a mind to pitch in with that gal and her beau, Wainey. Wonder if them others'll show fight. You stop that way to town and find out. Be perlite and offer the lady a ride!"

WAIN had no intention of giving Trig Malone and Tommy Hueber further ground for joshing about the nester bride, but he took the trail for the dam, passing Ann Franklin without halting. When he reached the breastworks he found no one there. Wagons and scrapers were deserted in the sand and brush adjoining, where they had been employed in building a ditch to carry water back from the dam. The homesteaders had other things to think of at the moment than completion of their irrigation system. The cowman headed for the first quarter section, where the McKim family had erected a shack of boards. Ab McKim was watching him from the doorway; his eyes were narrowed.

"My lands, it's that cowboy!" Red-cheeked Lucy McKim peered from behind her husband. "Now, Ab, don't you accuse him. He's a gentleman, and ain't connected with them scalawags!" Wain saw her move something from behind the door, and knew from the sound that it was a rifle or shotgun.

"Miss Franklin says you were ordered out." Wain held his place in the saddle. "How many of you?"

McKim glared, shuffled his bony frame within and slammed the door. Mrs. McKim opened it. "Don't you pay no 'tention; we ain't got a bone to pick with the likes of you. I told Ab if it come to a fight you would be jist the one to pitch in and help us pore folks, knowin' what you done—" She rattled on, and Wain grinned and rode on. McKim's attitude had told him enough.

Smoke was climbing from the elbow of the galvanized pipe protruding from the Meiggs' storebox corrugated iron mansion. Without going over, Wain saw no preparations for leaving—and the notice of banishment had designated that very Saturday morning train out of Providence. He cut down toward the creek. As his pony sank its forelegs into a dip along the bank, a flying object struck the animal on the nose; it reared, lunged and bolted, until the rider's gentle stiffening of the reins subdued it. Wain dismounted, soothed the pony, then hunted for the missile thrower.

He found her hiding in a depression in the sand-bank.

"You mustn't do that, missy." He shook his head at the golden-haired little girl he had seen on the immigrant wagon on the day of the rush. Her brown eyes were wide with fright. "Honest, mister, it was only a pebble—that big!" She made a hole between her small fingers. Wain smiled at her earnestness.

"What's yore name, missy?"

"It's Daisy!"

"A very pretty name." He sat beside

her. "How old are you?"

"Five'n a half." She held up the fingers of one hand. "I can count it. One, two, t'ree, four, five!" She separated the digits one by one.

"But you didn't count the half," said the man, reprovingly.

"You never count halfs, foolish!"

"You've been wading."

"'Course I have—wouldn't you wade if your mamma let you?"

"Reckon I might." Wain toyed with her yellow-gold curls, ran them through his bronzed fingers. "Well, I must be going—and you won't throw any more pebbles, will you, missy?"

"I will at cowboys!"

"W-why, I'm one. Why cowboys?" Wain grinned.

"Daddy says they're bad, and so does mamma, and for me never to talk to them —ever!"

"You'd better not, then, missy. Goodby."

"Goodby. And that's why I throwed the stone."

"Goodby, missy."

"Goodby." She blew him a kiss, and he returned it, worshipful, longing eyes on the fairy of nester-land as she placed tender toes in the stream.

He gave up the idea of further inquiry; it mattered not how many others would resist, these four holders would fight. He recalled the ruse the junta had employed the first time, pretending to be nesters, then betraying the settlers and leading them off to slaughter. His jaw squared; these families must not be thus decoyed and destroyed. Enough nester blood was already on the heads of the cattlemen.

Turning to go back via the dam, he marveled at the sight upstream, where the clearing waters of Spanish Creek were tumbling in a wide cascade over the rock spillway laid by the nesters on one side of the dam. Thus the river was being used and conserved at one and the same time; why had the ranch owners waited for nesters to teach them so simple a thing as that? Enough intensive range could have been irrigated to pull the herds of all the outfits through the worst drouth ever to visit the Caracara.

As he neared the dam he saw the determined and self-reliant Ann Franklin crossing the breastwork, still swinging her rifle. She took the planking that spanned the spillway, reached the near side, and then, while Wain's eyes focused in amazed unbelief, the figure of the girl was swallowed in a gigantic puff of dust and water.

A dull roar as of thunder smote the cowman's ears and brought swift realization of the truth: the dam had been blown up. A slowly mounting column of water in the creek crept downward, then burst high and swift as a cattle stampede, with the roar of a hundred thousand hoofs. Wain sank spurs, raced upward with a blind, instinctive impulse at rescue; then he as abruptly whirled in the saddle and looked back at the tiny golden-haired girl wading, frolicking in the creek, under the clay embankment.

The rush of waters passed him; he saw he could never outrun them, but he yanked his pony around to try as the picture of the helpless child, in curious attitude of surprise, shook his steel courage. As he raced she started to wade; the bank was too far, too high; Wain closed his eyes. As he opened them a woman's streaming hair rode with the tide at his feet. His rope was whirling, once, twice; it hit the water, flipped back, hit the water again, found anchorage, and Ann Franklin was pulled out with the rope about one wrist. Wain was off the saddle to raise her on high ground; he was back on his horse again without waiting to see if she would live. Where the nester child had been was a mad flood, but Wain Adams rode—rode with all the rider power of a cowman.

Hopeless he knew the task would be to race with the unleashed waters along the course of winding Spanish Creek; one chance in a million there might be across the homestead flat to meet the flood where it bent a crescent in the stream channel. He took that chance.

When his pony sank forelegs deep in the sand of the curve at the edge of the waters, Wain Adams left the saddle side and forward, arms and legs stretched; his eyes blinded for a moment and his face stung with the impact of chill substance; then his vision identified again what he had seen from the racing horse. He struck out, fought for every inch of gain, traveling swift as the flood; seized his burden, and fought back, knowing from the first he was too late, but yielding to an impulse that was greater than argu-

ment. The millionth chance was lost. He climbed onto the sunbaked loam and held the fairy form against his breast. "Can' you speak, little missy?" he panted, raising her arms, lowering them, then the legs, practicing in an awkward way such resuscitation methods as the range knew by hearsay. "I don't reckon you'll throw any more stones at cowboys, missy," he sobbed aloud. But he kept at it, for an hour. Then he rose, tired and heart-sick, and while frank tears trickled over his tanned cheeks he looked down at the lifeless form and said: "Little Missy, I can't do any more for you; but I promise you Ticote Hurd won't shed another drop of nester blood. God, what must it be to be the parents of the child at a time like this!"

He lifted the tiny burden, walked toward his horse. Running among the sand and mesquite hummocks above him he saw the distraught mother; she called to someone farther back, and hairy Jake Meiggs lunged through the sand and catclaw like an enraged bull. He was unarmed, but the spectacle of his wrath as he sighted the small golden head in the cowman's arms made Wain pause. Mrs. Meiggs' tired face registered agony, and she screamed as a wounded animal. Jake Meiggs had leaped, gorilla-like, reaching with his great paws for the cowman's throat; Wain braced himself, still holding his burden; but the mother's cry had warned the father that he had made a frightful mistake. His child had not been stolen.

THE giant stopped, dumb and stunned, then murmured incoherent words; the mother fainted, and Jake Meiggs, unheeding, let her lay in the sand; he reached for the child, and Wain gave her over. "She was wading; I worked over her an hour." The cowman said no more, but helped the mother home, walking beside his pony, while the big nester trod ahead in dumb haste.

At the shack, when Wain had seen the mother safely inside, he roused Jake Meiggs from a daze over the bunk where the little flood victim had been placed. "I don't reckon I'm much good at a time like this, neighbor; but you're strangers, and if there's anything I can do—money—or anything else, I'd like you to call on me."

The homesteader chuckled deep in his throat, looked at Wain with the eyes of one under a strange spell. "Money? Don't want any, friend. We don't want any money, do we, ma? Money won't bring her back. Nope. Not money! All we want now is cattlemen—cattlemen! Do you hear me? Cattlemen! 'Nihilators—show 'em to me. Where be them 'Nihilators, ma? Where'd you say they was? I ain't bugs, stranger—nary a bit! I know how you jumped in after her—and I kin recollect faces! You come around, any time. But God A'mighty help any other laddybuck that wears cowboy clothes—" His voice broke into sobs, and he went down to his knees. Wain repeated his tender to the woman, and walked slowly outside.

He had forgotten to think of Ann Franklin; when he saw her striding toward him, on the way to the Meiggs place, he was much surprised. Her garments were still wet and her light hair hung loose. She halted abruptly. "Why didn't you save that baby, instead of dragging me out?" she demanded.

"It was an accident, I reckon—you just happened by."

"I owe you my life, which isn't much—but thanks. You'd better not go up that way." She gestured toward the broken dam. "You'll be lynched. Who dynamited that dam, Adams?"

He did not reply, but watched the throng of homesteaders assembled about the death-trap. Others were coming from the back claims, some of them toward the Meiggs shack. Mrs. McKim waddled from the creek, wringing her hand; she had been searching for the missing Daisy, and had seen the arrival. Wain Adams swung up to the saddle and loped off, down along the booming creek. He passed excited homesteaders attracted to the stream by the flood; these had not yet heard the news of the drowning of the nester child. Passing through Old Town, where a few of the Mexican jacales were under water, he was forced to wait an hour before the creek had subsided enough to ford it, for the wooden bridge was out. Then he crossed to Lingo, on the lookout for Hurd.

The sole topic was the breaking of the dam; the suspicion everywhere was that the cattlemen and the Annihilators had struck again. When word came of the drowning of the little girl—Wain, for his own reasons, did not communicate

that news—there was a revulsion against the act. The Diamond Four man was told that Handsome Hurd, Paint Mustain, Pinky Teague and Gandara had ridden into Lingo from the Midnights at 8 o'clock in the morning and left for the Double Spur. He knew that they had gone elsewhere. Then he searched the range vainly; he resolved to wait until the meeting in the evening for an accounting with the panther man.

CHAPTER XXVII

Hurd Asks a Favor

HANDSOME HURD rode the foothills alone, in comparative safety, after the dynamiting of the dam, for he knew that every man on the ranges would be drawn to the creek, out of curiosity if not other interest. His three lieutenants had preceded him, on separate roundabout trails toward the Double Spur.

It had been a busy Friday night, from the time the four riders had left their notices of banishment at the doors of the remaining nesters who occupied the strategic riverland that he, Barry Berg and Bingo Goodman coveted. For weeks the Ticote chief had watched the progress of the little irrigation system with growing concern, and Barry Berg had visited him in hiding at the Double Spur on more than one occasion to urge that something be done. It had been done, that morning, with a box of sixty per cent and a safety fuse while Hurd and his men watched the blast from the bosque. Ann Franklin's appearance on the dam after the fuse had been lighted had not been counted on, but it did not matter. Hurd stood his ground long enough to see Wain Adams drag the nester woman from the creek and to see the golden-haired child disappear in the flood; then had given sharp command to his three hands to ride east, while he took the safer trail back toward the foothills.

A bawling calf attracted the rider's attention, in a swale ahead. He turned his mount at a slight angle, reined up suddenly and drew his holstered forty-five. He did not fire, but watched the scene below with keen interest. A ragged, cadaverous-faced creature was carefully wiping a long-bladed, bloody knife on the pulpy stalk of a soapweed; beside him lay a stuck cow and calf, panting their last.

"That sheepherder, Joe Mercedes," muttered Hurd. He fingered his Colt, toyed with it. That morning, and many mornings recently, he had not taken his deadly thirty-eight with him, for there was danger that Marshal Hildebrand might encounter him and search for such a weapon—and Wain Adams had given proof that he suspected Hurd was carrying a hidden gun. Hurd needed the practice with the forty-five. He thrust it back into its sheath, made ready for a swift draw that would end the cattle-sticking career of the breed. Then abruptly he bent forward, grinned. He spurted forward, and as Mercedes reached for his own weapon, Hurd covered him with ease.

"Butchering?" grinned the cowman.

The breed's burning eyes stared with the light of the insane. He did not reply. Hurd looked at the brands—Box A. That was just as well. He spoke soothingly:

"Hombre, stick 'em all; now's yore chance—every cow hand is down at the creek. And I'll give you two-bits for every one you stick, pay in avance." He drew out his wallet, let a gold eagle fall into the sand. "Mix the brands all you can, hombre, and good luck!" He rode out of the swale at a slant, to make sure the demented sheepherder did not take a notion to use his gun.

An hour later he circled around the Box A in such a way that he seemed to approach from his own establishment, and entered Arnott's office. The Box A owner had just returned from the creek, with every man of the ranch and Judy. Arnott started noticeably when the big blond's frame loomed in the doorway.

"God, when'll this end, ma'am?" Worry lines creased Arnott's high forehead. "Now we've got a baby to answer for, and Hildebrand's goin' to round up the last of us, for them six shot in the Midnights, and—"

"How you know Hildebrand's goin' to act?" queried Hurd, quickly.

"He questioned me, and he knows the names of the whole junta. Some spy has—"

"ADAMS!" belched Hurd, in feigned anger. "But we'll look after him, pronto. I just came out, Charley, to say I've acted, in this last regrettable happening. Those damn highbinders have been given their walking-papers. Not that I think they were really to blame. They made a straightforward case out of that bunch of six—had to do it, Charley, to prevent a mutiny. Of course, it was bad enough, and we wouldn't have done it, acting for ourselves. We'd have used more wisdom in seeing those nesters didn't have no guns on 'em. The same with this child that was drowned. Regrettable, to be sure—but Bickers, Jolly and the rest couldn't tell that little nester would be playing there when they blew the dam. They are sorry as any of us. But, as I said, I'm through with 'em—they're gone."

"Gone," groaned Arnott, "and letting us hold the sack for their crimes! And now you fired 'em, chances are they'll squeal all they know."

"Not any, Charley. I fired 'em by handing 'em a bit of change each. Enough to keep 'em still. Not only that—I know exactly where to put my paws on them if needed. If Hildebrand should try to make arrests, I'll turn that bunch over to him, and that'll let us out."

"That's better," sighed Arnott, somewhat dubiously. "Not that I want them to be the goat, either—since it was accidental, I'm willing to stand up on my own, Handsome, and I feel you are, too."

"Nobody ever accused me otherwise, Charley. There's one thing worries me about this child case; it's apt to make those nesters balky. Fact is, I don't think they're catching the train out today, like Bickers and Jolly notified 'em to do."

"We'd better let it slide this time, Hurd."

"No, that don't do. If we let a single nester get away with a bluff, we'll never get another one out of the Caracara, Charley. We've got 'em moving now—we've got to keep 'em on the trot. This time, though, if they stick, we'll see they're handled gentle enough—put on the train east of Providence, or something like that. But we got to make 'em go—you can see that, Charley."

"Yeah," the other admitted, grudgingly, "if Hildebrand don't close in on us now, after this dam bust."

"If it wasn't for that dam going out, Charley, we'd never starved 'em out through the summer—those that we couldn't reach in time with our 'move-on' play. Where's Adams keeping himself?"

"He ain't been around since him and Murch got shot up by yore men at the Spur. Spyin' around then, too, and our friendship's over with." Arnott's worried face hardened. "A cowman that rides with nesters is a traitor."

"What I've said right along, Charley. I'll tell the committee just what Adams has been pulling, when we meet tonight. So long!"

"S'long."

Hurd took the direct trail for the Double Spur, but at one place where he saw a little bunch of Box A stock near the creek he veered sharply and entered the cottonwood bosque. He rode for some distance down the trail, then back up again, made sure that he was not observed, then drew his six-shooter and laid two heifers and a steer into the dust. Mounting quickly, he rode furiously up and down the trail, as though hunting for someone. He encountered no one, and cut off back to the trail on the open range. A mile further on, he saw a rider and headed him off.

"Nesters just shot some Box A stock down by the creek," he informed. "I heard the shooting, but when I got down the skunks had gone. Tell Charley Arnott, will you? I just talked with him a half an hour ago."

Wiggy Wilson drummed off in a cloud of dust.

At the Double Spur, Hurd left hasty directions to his men. "Shoot a couple head of Seven Bar X and old YT, pronto. If one of you can make it to the Lazy K, knock a couple over there. Don't touch a head of Diamond Four—nesters the friend of that outfit, savvy? Watch like hell you don't get caught—better do it in the open, where you can see you're alone, and near the creek as possible. Then come back to the Spur."

HE took a fresh mount and rode swiftly into Lingo. Barry Berg was eating dinner in his office from a tray brought in from the lunch-house; he bounded up quickly at sight of Hurd and locked the door. "Vat vill ve do now, vit the nesters arming?"

"Who said they were arming?"

"Everybody knows it! Dot boomer, J. B., iss at the headt of it! Him and dot big grizzly bear vat you downt his daughter!"

"Let 'em arm." Hurd slid into a chair. "It makes our play all the better, with Arnott and the rest; they're half scared over developments. We want 'em to kill a few nesters, on their own, tonight. That's why I'm butchering a few of yore cows, Barry!"

"Putchering! My gows! I don't understand."

"I'm getting rid of a few of the stock yore chattel mortgages are on, Barry." The Ticote man grinned. "Nesters are slaughterin' 'em right and left. Savvy the burro?"

"They vill be doing more than dot! But vhy—?"

"I'm having them knocked over, so the nesters will be given the credit, and Arnott and Nafe and Dish and Hide will see red. Now do you understand?"

"Gott! Vot a head you have, Handsomeer!"

The big blond rocked back and forth on heel and toe, his hands in the side pockets of his linsey coat. "If things go right, we'll be jake tomorrow, Barry, all ready to take over the ranch outfits as the notes fall due. I mean Arnott and his neighbors will be in jail. Tonight I am to use 'em to help take that level section from the four nesters right across from the Diamond Four—we'll need it for the dam site. Then Hildebrand can act; I've got my alibis all catalogued. But the biggest job of all, Barry, is to close the mouth of that runt Adams—he's onto part of my play! I've got it figured out, and I hate to keep it secret from a good friend like you!"

"Shood, Handsomer, shood!" Barry Berg was not much of a student of character, but he knew the egotism of the Ticote chief was being fed by the banker's flattering ejaculations and clamored for further adulation.

But caution overcame even the hunger for praise. "I'll see you at yore house in the morning, Barry, and tell you how I potted that little snake. It'll be done tonight, if I can work it to get the runt out to that meeting at Arnott's—and I knew he won't stay away if he's tipped off I'm there waiting for him. Adios!"

He went out hastily as he had come, invaded the Maverick saloon and exchanged a word with Peter Slavitik. "You ain't seen that runt Adams, have you, Pete?"

"Yep, he was in this mornin'; Joe said he seen him ridin' home. Why?"

"Nothing much, Pete. Only he gave it out he was looking for me. Understand?"

Pete was an obliging cuss, and took Hurd's word for that Wain had been making gun talk. Having accomplished that little job of fence-fixing, the Ticote man strode across to the post office and found Marshal Hildebrand playing solitaire at his desk.

"Reckon you know I'm back, marshal?"

"Heard as much, Hurd."

"Came in this morning, about eight. Too bad about that nester tot; thought you'd be out burning leather, marshal." He looked at the card layout.

"Anything I can do for you, Ticote?"

HURD extended a cigar. "Yes, there is, Hildebrand. You've been taking yore time about closing in on that junta, since I told you what I know."

"Didn't like to act, Hurd, till you returned, as a witness. Looks as if I'd have to show my hand now, with this dynamiting and child murder. First thing I know public sentiment will be driving me out of town!" Hildebrand lit the gift cigar. "What was it you said you wanted?"

"Came to seek a favor, marshal." The cowman bent forward. "Hold off those arrests one more day—and I'll turn complete state's evidence."

"Why the extra day?"

"There's going to be a big play tonight against the nesters, marshal. Have yore couple deputies up handy to the bride-and-groom claims. The nesters will be armed a-plenty, account of that sad case to-day— and I'll be handy, helping you, with my three guns. What say?"

"It sounds mighty interesting, Hurd. I guess I can wait a day."

The cowman rose. "You'll be able to grab yore men to-night, Hildebrand." He stamped out, spur chains rattling. As he sought his horse at the hitch-rail he smiled crookedly.

"Danged near an afterthought, to put that bug in the ear of the law! That's better than running the risk of kidnap-

ping those four nester families, with all the homestead district in arms. What'll Barry think about losing that one section? Let him think! Better to grab off the Diamond Four, Box A and the big ones than to face any more jackpots in the final clean-up!"

He stared with avid eyes at the trim figure of Judy Arnott, rising in the saddle half way up the street. "Now I've got to make her dad's thick-heads try to corral that little nester bunch—and I reckon that won't be any man's job, especially when they find their butchered cows!" He turned in slow and easy pursuit of the cowgirl.

"She'll be plumb interested in how Wainey Adams pulled that big she-nester out of the creek, being right handy for said rescue of the handsomest girl on the Caracara, next to her!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Treachery

SATURDAY afternoon broke dismal and blustery, the late November sun that had warmed the morning giving way to heavy clouds that shrouded the Caracara valley from the Midnights. The promise of more rain and good winter grass meant little to the cattlemen, who realized that the crisis in their affairs spelled doubtful victory if they won, with the threat of arrest and prosecution ahead, and certain ruin if they lost in their battle to reopen the range. But there was no turning back now, with the fight at least partly won—and this argument gave Handsome Hurd the lever he needed to spur on the ranch owners in the face of unlooked-for complications in the taking of nester blood.

But Wain Adams had seen enough to tell him his neighbors were being driven into more desperate straits by false leadership than if they abandoned the fight to the nesters. He believed there must be a way out; if Barry Berg's bank refused to co-operate, through connivance that he only vaguely suspected, there must be some other source of loans that would tide them over through a good-grass winter, even though the range were more than halved. These convictions were aside from his antipathy to Hurd and his hatred of the crimes of the recent weeks.

But his heart remained loyal to the cattlemen, in spite of his determination of the morning to see that the little group of nesters across the creek did not suffer from the savage purposes of the Ticote cowman. When Old Man Lea, after learning of the death of little Daisy, stepped down from the gallery and climbed into Wain's saddle to show that his wound would not hinder "givin' them nesters a gun hand again such coyotes as Hurd," the ranch owner made answer:

"I reckon the place to settle this thing, Murch, is not on nester ground, but right on our own home range." He scratched his head doubtfully and then:

"Mebbeso, but—" He waddled back to the gallery step. "Wainey, I kinda thought—" Shuffling his feet, he blinked painfully. "Mebbe it's too personal to say, Wainey—?"

"What's ailing you, Murch?"

"I kinda half-way thought mebbe, Wainey, you might be a leetle bit taken with that there—that there nester lady, Wainey, if yuh don't mind me—"

"Where'd you get that idea?" snapped the boss. "She's going to marry that lunger, and he's welcome."

"No; he won't live long enough; and a scrub critter like him ain't fitten any handsome lady—

"Shut up, Murch."

"Shore; I was jest noticin' how things look, and with the joshin'—you know. And since you split up with Miss Judy, and all—danged if I wasn't ready to fight for the nester girl for yuh, Wainey!"

"Thanks." Wain turned serious eyes on the kindly major-domo. "I'd give my two hands and legs if I could marry Judy Arnott, but I reckon I'm not deuce high with her any more. Maybe it's Judy that makes me keen to match guns with Hurd, more than his deeds—to save her from him. I don't know" He started whistling, to hide pained features, and stamped off toward the horse corral.

He fell to thinking. "If even Murch gets that idea, I don't reckon I can blame Miss Judy for accusing me. Events have done me wrong." A choking sensation rose in his throat.

"Judy, Judy—Judy." He liked to

say the word, aloud, when alone—had said it many times even when he thought she ridiculed and derided him. "Judy . . . Judy Arnott . . . you can't be for a man like Hurd. Judy!"

"Miss Judy sends word she wants to see yuh, Wainey!" The cowman stiffened as though shot at; he turned to behold the grinning countenance of moon-eyed Tommy Hueber.

THE little ranch boss laid hand on his saddle-horn, and his pulse raced rapidly as he lifted himself to the stirrups. His last interview with Judy had been a bitter one, and the memory of her charge of interest in the nester girl still rankled in him. But he recalled that even Murch Lea had been deceived by appearances, and he forgave the cowgirl her suspicions. He would make things plain to her.

When he reached the Box A he found a wholly different Judy from the haughty and fiery girl he had left in the saddle on her range while he rode away from her in anger. She was unsaddling at the bars of the horse corral fence, but Wain knew she was there waiting for him. He apologized for his rudeness in riding away from her so unceremoniously. Her rejoinder chilled him.

"Daddy asked me to send for you, Wain; I wouldn't have done it otherwise." She spoke with quiet calm. "Every man is the master of his own destiny and must be his own judge. But daddy thought I might persuade you to be loyal to the range, for old time's sake, if I talked to you."

It was true that Arnott had asked her to send the message; he did not trust himself to talk further with Wain after Hildebrand had secured the names of the junta; he thought Judy might get an admission, or better, an explanation from him. And back of that was the adroitly conceived suggestion of Handsome Hurd that a preliminary meeting be held in the afternoon, and Wain Adams summoned to explain his alleged act of betrayal.

"You don't think I'm disloyal to the range, do you, Miss Judy!" he asked her, in sober tones.

"One cannot carry water on both shoulders, Wain. I am not accusing you, for what you cannot help. What you have done is your own affair—a personal matter, between you and—her. It is nothing to me—"

"What are you talking about, Judy-girl?"

"It is nothing to us—your friendliness with Ann Franklin—but when you—"

Wain laughed bitterly. 'There you go again! Bringing up that falsehood. I—"

"Don't lie to me!" Her boyish figure straightened; her whole manner changed. "Don't tell me you haven't been spending your time behind the nester lines—carrying supplies to that woman, going to that locator and making him pay her money, at gun point; allowing her to come to the Diamond Four—it's the talk of the range, Wain Adams! And this morning, when that dam broke, where were you? On the nester claim, as usual—right handy to help her from the creek and save her life. Oh, I'm not blind, Wain Adams!" She flipped her quirt against her glossy riding boots. "Now lie out of it, if you can!"

The little cowman's enigmatic eyes glinted. All the apologetic words he had contrived vanished. Wain did not understand women; did not know that the very heat of her unjust attack proved that the tiny range girl did care about the other. "If that's all you've got to say, Miss Judy, I reckon it won't be any use to talk a bit more." But he did not go, and she laughed at him.

"It's too bad, Wain, to have to catch you in a trap this way! Not that any of us care, about a *personal* matter. Heavens knows, you owed it to Miss Franklin to toss a rope to her in the flood, after the way she pitched a whole bundle of luggage in Handsome Hurd's path, trying to save you!" Merriment that peeled from her bud lips was mistaken by Wain for the genuine. He looked pained, but determination shone in his eyes.

"We're wasting time," he said, doggedly. "Yore dad didn't send for me to talk about a nester woman that's no more to me than any other human being that's white and decent, trying to help the poor devil she's wearing her fingers off to serve and restore to health, so they can be married and earn an honest living. Where's Charley Arnott, that he didn't send for me himself?" He glanced toward the ranch house and the

corner room that served as an office. The door was closed—which seemed to Wain unusual.

SHE was gazing at him intently, searchingly. "There's a meeting, Wain," she said, slowly and calmly.

"Now? I thought it was to be this evening!" His frame tensed slightly and his hand instinctively found the position of his holster. "Is Ticote Hurd around the Box A—now?"

"No, he isn't here. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, quarreling with him all the time!"

Wain's jaw hardened. "I'll take care of that. He's lucky, having such a defender, on the day he took the life of a little child—"

"It isn't true—he's discharged all those men, in spite of their argument that it was pure accident. Father wanted me to hear your answer to one more question, Wain. Why did you turn the names of the junta over to Hildebrand, if you haven't gone completely over to the nesters? They are killing our cattle, and—"

"I didn't. Yore friend Hurd can answer that better."

"How ridiculous. Is that all you have to say to it?"

"Yes—" He took a step back; his hand went to his holster, then relaxed. A face had flitted for an instant at the bunk-house startlingly like that of Paint Mustain. The girl looked at him in wonder.

"Is one of those Ticote men in that bunk-house, Miss Judy!" asked Wain, grimly.

"Of course not. You're seeing things!"

"You say Handsome Hurd is not at that meeting?"

"No, he isn't." She laughed lightly. "This gun business is getting on your nerves, isn't it, Wain?" She grew serious. "They want you in there, before you leave. I was called in just before you came—they've got you on trial."

"On trial, eh?" The cowman's eyes narrowed. "What charge?"

"Treachery."

"And Hurd not present." Wain laughed bitterly.

"He wasn't when I was there, a moment ago. They're discussing him, too, and his responsibility, alone."

They were in fact discussing both Wain Adams and Hurd, but the Ticote chief had won his point, for, unknown to Judy Arnott, he had arrived on the back trail with his men, placed them at the end of the long bunk-house and entered Arnott's office from the gallery side. The cattle slaying was not the principal subject.

"That much is settled, then," Charley Arnott was saying. "We cain't quit now, and Handsome will see that money is handed them four families to leave, if necessary, after we take 'em to-night. How many men can we-all figure on, in case of a fight?"

They counted up: Bittick, Dishawn and Burman each could furnish four to six, as good shots as the range boasted, and Hurd said he'd watch them with his three, so far as gun-work went. He didn't anticipate any trouble getting the four banished homestead families after midnight that night, and the cowmen could handle them as they choose; Hurd would offer them better claims on the Dagger settlement, or pay them cash, for the moral effect. The whole idea was to make good on the threat of the Annihilators. Either that or quit the fight for good—while cows were slaughtered.

"And I reckon there ain't any further question of the treachery of Wainey Adams," Arnott went on, after the night's program had been decided upon. "Hildebrand mentioned every name, and we all know he's been palaverin' with the marshal off and on for weeks, besides buckin' us and spendin' his time with them nesters, makin' that locator pay over money and the rest."

"That don't happen to be all," put in the Ticote cowman, standing with his back to the wall, where he could command a view through the window of Judy Arnott and the Diamond Four man. He had held his ace card until the last. "The other night, when that runt went over spyin' on the Spur, he brought Hildebrand with him."

"Th' hell yuh say!" Dish Dishawn snapped away his cigarette. Hide Burman muttered an oath.

"YEAH. Hen Bickers and Bill Jolly was on one side of the drive, back of the umbrella trees; they potted the old man—he and Adams came up ahead. Then when Adams' horse goes down ac-

cording to Hen, that runt cries out to the marshal: 'Come on, Hildebrand; we've got 'em!' If it wasn't for that, we'd have been shut of that little snake by now."

"He's guilty as a sheepherder," agreed Charley Arnott. "If I'd knowed that, I wouldn't ever had Judy bring him over to hear his tale. And him takin' the oath. By God, I never thought Harvey Adams' boy would snake his friends like that!"

"Shows what a woman'll do—even a nester-heifer." Hurd's bow lips straightened, turned down. "He can't be handled like those nesters, either—he'll come back, and turn state's evidence and we'll go to the hoosegow."

"Hildebrand's likely to close in on us to-night, account of that runt's treachery," growled Burman.

"Yeah, he might," admitted Hurd. "But we'll get bail, and clean the range before trial—and the jury'll be a cattle jury. But that don't make Adams less a traitor." He watched the pair by the horse corral, and his eyes shifted to the bunkhouse behind which three gunmen lurked near a partly-opened door.

"If it wasn't for Harvey Adams, I'd be in favor of—" Charley Arnott did not finish the sentence. The Ticote chief read his mind.

"If that's the way you all feel about it, I don't mind saying he's run his last blazer on yours truly." Hurd's tone was earnest, eloquent. "I've let that coyote call my hand, done what I could to make peace and try to bring him into the fold. Now it's going the rounds that he's aiming to pot me on sight. He's a hand with a pistol—if there ever was one. I see Judy sending him over here now, and if you gents consider it an even-handed deal, I'll let him make good that same threat, here and now. If Handsome Hurd's too slow, Paint and Pinky and Gandy will join you tonight on the nester play. Do I hear any objections?"

There were none. Hurd glanced through the window as Wain reached the gallery, and he saw the splotch-faced Paint Mustain move almost imperceptibly back of the bunkhouse. The Ticote cowman's big right hand rested in the side pocket of his linsey coat and the fingers closed on a deadly little thirty-eight automatic — a weapon that more than once had belched death through that same pocket, without being seen. His forty-five gun was shoved conspicuously forward at his left side, and his eyes watched the jamb of the inner door past which Wain Adams would move within the minute.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Sheriff Arrives

As Wain Adams went through the open hall doorway, deliberately choosing to avoid the closed door to the office in front, he decided swiftly on a course of action. In spite of Judy Arnott's words, he had one of his uncanny hunches that the big blond cowman was in the conference room—suggested by the hint of the presence of Paint Mustain somewhere about the bunkhouse. He would have chosen to verify the presence of Mustain but for the knowledge that if he were the victim of a frame-up the bunkhouse would prove an effective fortress for his foes.

There was the chance that in Arnott's office he would be given an opportunity to answer the charges against him, even if Hurd were present; but he would take no risks. Hurd, if waiting, would expect him to enter by the gallery door; Wain would take the hallway and appear suddenly at the inner office door, which, he felt sure, would be ajar. One thought smote him to the depths; if his hunch was right that the Ticote gunman was about, Judy had betrayed him. But he discarded the thought instantly, for Judy would not do that even though in a matter of life and death she would be a partisan of Hurd. On the instant, half way through the hallway, he heard the cowgirl's cry of alarm.

On the heels of it he heard her distinct scream: "Wain!" He whirled, gun leaping, and as the figure of a bandy-legged devil in chaps silhouetted in the doorway, with weaving six-shooter, Wain Adams fired, once. Pinky Teague fell on the threshold, and his pistol blazed in dying rage, wide of its mark, then rattled to the floor. Wain Adams leaped clear, gun cocked and ready, facing the yard and the bunkhouse. He did not know that Hurd had made a sign at the window, previously agreed upon, if his intended

victim should by any chance evade the front door; Hurd could not watch two doors at once; he had studied the office room, and was willing enough to play the game alone and win the credit if the little cowman appeared according to plan; otherwise, his lieutenants were ready.

On the open gallery, Wain glimpsed Paint Mustain and Gandara, but they were not reinforcing their worsted confederate with their guns; they were riding, past the corrals, south. A cavalcade of five men, rounding the horsesheds to the east, gave answer. Wain recognized the erect figure of Hildebrand, his tall deputy, Henry Derrick, and a bulky rider who resembled Sheriff Dan Lilly. Judy Arnott seized the cowman's arm.

"Oh, Wain! I made a terrible mistake! Hurd is in that room—I saw him through the window, just as you stepped inside—then I screamed, and that other man ran up—!"

"There, there! That's all right, Judy girl!" Wain's heart thrilled at her vindication, her loyalty to him when the big test came. The officers neared. "I'll handle Ticote—if he makes a false play with this posse here." Hildebrand and Lilly swung from their saddles.

"Shootin'?" queried the sheriff. "You, Wainey?"

Hildebrand strode to the gallery, to the still form in the doorway. Charley Arnott and his neighbors emerged from the hallway. Wain Adams watched for Hurd, stepped aside from the cowgirl. Wain told his story, and Judy corroborated his every word. Arnott and the rest had heard two shots, knew nothing more. Handsome Hurd did not put in an appearance. The sheriff, old-time friend of Harvey Adams and his boy, made brusque decision:

"Way they skipped tells the story," motioning toward the creek, whence Gandara and Mustain had fled. "Be at the marshal's Monday mornin', Wainey. I ain't opened that deputy office yet." The two officers mounted besides their three deputies, swerved back east. Hildebrand had not spoken a word. They headed in the direction of the Double Spur, their original course.

WAIN ADAMS met Charley Arnott's grim and hostile gaze; he read the sullen looks of Dishawn, Bittick and Burman. "Now you can tell Ticote to come out, Mister Arnott." As he completed the sentence, the Diamond Four man saw a rider on the slope beyond the ranch house. "I don't reckon you'll have to," he grinned, genially. "Mister Hurd's *gone!*"

He exchanged a single look with Judy Arnott, turned toward his saddled pony at the corral bars. In a moment he was following the draw that pitched upward toward the spot where Handsome Hurd had vanished over the next rise.

He passed a pair of cow carcasses, saw that they had been knife-killed; topping the draw, he found Hurd was not in sight, but Dallas Hines, Arnott's foreman, was burning leather for the ranch house. He halted an instant. "Nesters been shootin' everything in sight, anywheres near the bosque!" Hines was gone, flinging his arm eastward as Wain yelled at him a question if he had seen Hurd.

The Diamond Four man cut off that direction. His hunch again was working; Hildebrand was leading the sheriff toward the Double Spur for a purpose; the Ticote chief had made a hurried retreat from the Arnott place because he was expecting Hildebrand, and did not want to meet the marshal in the presence of Charley Arnott. This was but surmise, on the part of Wain, but when Hurd loomed up on the range ahead, converging in on the five officers, the little cowman felt his hazard was correct. He gave cautious pursuit—it was more important to observe than to force the issue, at this juncture.

Hurd and the officers were still separated by perhaps two miles. Wain stuck to the scrub cedar on the southern slope; he observed the big blond gunman halt suddenly on the rim of a rincon, a half-formed canyon bowl leading out from the foothills where they jutted toward the creek. Then Hurd sank out of sight, into the rincon. A gun shot echoed from the dip, and Wain Adams raked his bronco into a gallop.

HE went down the gentle slope of the rincon, in time to see Hurd jog up the opposite side, partly screened by the scrub. Taking the trail Hurd had followed, the pursuer in a few minutes came across the prostrate form of a ragged, unkempt creature whom he recognized instantly as the sheepherder, Joe Mer-

cedes. The breed's chest was heaving; Wain flung down, stooped, and the herder opened his eyes.

"*Amigo,*" he muttered, between agonized gasps, "the *señor* shoot a-me. He gave me *dinero,* monie, to keel the cattle. *Ahora,* now he say he keel a-me. Then I don't tal nobodie!" His eyes rolled to their whites, glazed over. Wain saw at a glance the hole in his neck was fatal. The breed had relaxed, dead. Hastily the cowman went through the pockets of his faded, torn blue overalls, and found the gold coin that told the story. Wain's temple muscles bulged as he rose to the saddle, and tracked Hurd further east.

The posse had sighted the panther-man, veered over. They were near the willow and cottonwoods bosque that lined Spanish creek, a mile from the Double Spur.

The late afternoon storm clouds broke with startling suddenness, drenching the range with slanting sheets of rain. Through the downpour Wain saw a rider halt before the possemen and Hurd, confer a moment with them, then lope steadily on. The Diamond Four man bent around a motte of low cedars, waited until the lone horseman drew near; he recognized Bert Cook, one of Clay Shepard's old riders, who had always been friendly. Wain let his presence be known, and Bert veered over, hunched under his slicker. "Ah— of a night, Wainey, to fight them nesters!"

"Yeah. What's yore orders, Bert?"

"I got to round up every hand, far as I can make it through the muck by dark; why'n h— don't Bittick and Dish notify their own bunch? You tell 'em, Wainey, any you see. This storm'll bring 'em in, most of 'em. Ain't it h— the way them nesters has been killin' cattle?"

"Joe Mercedes, the sheepherder, killed most of 'em; he's dead up the draw. Ticote shot him." Wain did not want to go into the matter of Hurd's guilt, at the moment.

"Nesters been shootin' a lot all day—more'n one man. You want my slicker, Wainey?"

"Thanks, no." The Diamond Four owner rode on. Hurd and the officers had entered the bosque. Although drenched to the skin, Wain did not mind; he took the first arroyo, now running with water, and headed for the creek and the bosque.

The rain and the wind gusts were in his favor; five brief minutes on the bosque trail brought the sound of voices, from upwind. Wain left the saddle, screened his mount, and went forward on foot. "Ain't any sense in us goin' any further, in this rain, Hurd," he recognized the voice of Hildebrand. Their horses were turned in the trail, under the dripping cottonwoods. "We've settled everything now, I take it."

"Everything except Pete Slavitik got a shipment of rifles in, figuring to sell 'em if this kind of trouble broke. I mightn't see him; you take the shipment, marshal, and hand 'em out as needed. There'll be two hundred nesters on the ground if there's a man. Now I've got to round up my little crew, and I'll meet you around 10 o'clock, at the bend in the creek under the Meiggs shack. That settled?"

"All jake." The officers turned uptrail. "What's that?" A thunderbolt crashed somewhere on the range, but it was another sound that reached Hildebrand. In a moment two horses loped through the rain.

"MY hands." Hurd made sign to Mustain and Gandara to halt. The officers gave the pair only casual scrutiny, then went on. As the hoofbeats died, the big cowman profaned the name of the Diety and the Holy Ghost. "Why'd you streak?" he snarled, when he could compose himself.

"We didn't want to git in no jackpot," asserted Mustain, "with the sheriff comin'. We figgered you and Pinky would handle the runt—"

"And he got Pinky, dead center." Hurd swore again. "I'd potted him, but I didn't want to miss Hildebrand at the Spur. Now we got to figure what way that runt jumps, and get him to-night if we don't drill another one of the junta."

'That orta be easy," soothed Mustain.

"Yeah, I reckon it will. Don't vamoose even when you see the sheriff to-night, savvy? He's fixed, with Hildebrand. We ride with them. Keep yore eyes peeled; if Adams works with nesters, we get him from behind, right in the middle of the nester herd, savvy? And if he works with Arnott, we get him with the whole cavvy. Damn that lightning—enough to blind a man! Now for a bite of chuck, and a big night's work. And don't forget poor little Pinky when you

see that snake that drilled him!"

As they veered toward the Spur, Wain Adams trod back to his mount. "Charley Arnott wouldn't believe a word of it, if I fought 'em all and won, here and now," he reflected, grimly. "And Hildebrand wouldn't have any more proof than he ever had who killed Derrick. Hurd's got to be met before witnesses, and I reckon to-night during the big play is the time to show the range who's been a traitor from the start!"

He rode through the rain on the shorter bosque trail to the Box A; it was dusk when he arrived; the thunder and lightning made the evening both dismal and portentious of the mood of the Caracara. Wain was drenched and chilled from the long ride without coat or slicker; that worried him little. He expected his neighbor cattlemen would remain at the Arnott house for supper; cowpunchers were gathered in numbers at the kitchen of the men's quarters. The Box A was a rallying place.

But when the little owner of the Diamond Four stepped to the door in his dripping clothes, accepting the custom of the country to eat and warm himself at his neighbor's board, Charley Arnott informed him he *could* come in, if he'd consider himself as welcome as a mad coyote.

CHAPTER XXX

Rain and Gunfire

Of course Wain did not go in, in spite of the fact that Judy Arnott had overheard her father and had come to the door and interceded, as much as her training to respect parental authority would permit —and more, for she stepped to the gallery and tried to set things right. The Diamond Four man expressed his appreciation, would give her no word that she could carry to the cattlemen to prove his loyalty to the range, and walked across to the lamplighted, smoke-filled quarters of the hands. As he went inside, after shaking the water from him like drenched retriever, and strode to the cheery burning twin logs at the end of the kitchen, he remarked dryly to the lolling company:

"I'm about as popular around here as a tarantula, I reckon, but if there's any of you wants to start anything, now's the time to squawk!"

He sat on his heels in front of the crackling flames, warming his chilled blood if not his spirits. Indifferent as he was to exposure ordinarily, a big night's work must be done, much depended upon him, and for the sake of his secret pledge to himself to meet Hurd that night with guns, he dried his clothes while he waited for supper—and no man said him nay.

It chagrined him to find two of his own punchers present, Trig Malone and Tommy Hueber; news of the impending "run-in" with the nesters had traveled rapidly and far. Bert Cook was there, with Fat Stevens, Wiggy Wilson and eight others; more were expected, and arrived before the meal was over and after. They were a silent and glum company, their usual joshing at an end in the presence of the man suspected of fighting and spying on his own kind in favor of "grangers" who would shoot and stick cattle, after squatting on the cowmen's domain.

Wain Adams, after partaking of Pots' double fare, topped off with three cups of black coffee, left a dollar in the amazed cook's hand to replenish the larder of what he had eaten. He expected to have it out with Arnott before the time for action arrived; but Arnott did not wait for him. News had traveled of his presence, and the Box A owner stamped over in a sputtering rage. "Come over here, Adams; we're goin' to talk to you!"

Wain went, after leisurely helping himself to an extra slicker from a peg, noting that Arnott led him not to the dwelling part of the house but to the office, which was lighted up with the members of the junta present, lacking the Ticote bunch. But Wain entered warily, prepared for Hurd; he took a place between the two doors. Arnott plunged in immediately.

"You cain't live on the Caracara any more, Mister Adams, among neighbors that despises you for turnin' snake, after yore oath, betrayin' yore kind for a woman and for hatred of a man that's head and shoulders bigger'n you. If it wasn't for yore dad—" He choked up. "You kin get out, with yore sick father, and God pity him for havin' yuh for a son— We've put others out, and we aim

to put you, if yuh don't leave within a week. I'm—" His face reddened, as he met the steely gaze of the little man. "Nafe, you tell him—"

"You don't mean a word of that, Charley." Wain's tense features relaxed; he felt that Arnott, in spite of himself, was doubtful of his ground. "What are you going to do, with all these riders? Fight nesters—out of revenge for those slain cattle? Kidnap the little bunch across the creek? You better leave this mob behind—or the whole country will know yore every move, and you'll open yoreselves to criminal prosecution—"

"YOU danged coyote!" flared Arnott, in sudden new anger. "After yuh turned yuh names over to Hildebrand! You aim to let us go again' the nesters—the whole nester bunch armin'—with a handful, eh! Criminal prosecution!" he scoffed. "We're ready, every man! We're goin' to take our medicine, take bail—we'll have a cattleman jury—but when we face trial the nesters won't be on the Caracara, and we don't give a damn what the charges are!"

"You're the only man living that can call me names like coyote, Charley," said the Diamond Four man, easily. "I don't reckon it's worth wasting words on, for me to tell you, you're being played for suckers by Hurd—I don't savvy what his game is, even yet, but—"

"Leave Ticote out of it, Adams," growled Dishawn. "He's—" A banging at the door stopped him; Arnott swung it open, revealing Fat Stevens, wide-eyed, a rifle on his slickered forearm. "C'mon! Hurd says; jist sent word with Pedro nesters is crossin' the crick at the bend! He'll meet us this side!" Horses were clattering in the rain; cowpunchers were streaking, pulling up other mounts from the corral, saddling, issuing confused orders. Arnott bolted from the room; Wain Adams went with him, Bittick, Burman, Dishawn and Shepard at his heels.

"Don't do it, Charley," Wain was urging, in as composed tones as he could command. "Hurd's leading you into a trap. If you go, order these riders behind—"

"You ain't goin'!" snarled Arnott, dragging his saddle. "We don't want a spy—" He sputtered angry expletives. Wain kept at his heels, while he and the others roped and saddled horses. He saw the futility of argument, but kept at it, and when Arnott and Bittick led the range forces toward the creek, Wain scarped the Box A owner's saddle, shouted above the swish of rain and wind, mud-splattering hoofbeats, between crashes of thunder. "Hurd's leading Hildebrand and Dan Lilly to take you-all, while you fight the nesters." If Arnott heard, he gave no answer. It drove home to Wain that the charge sounded ridiculous; why should the officers take such a method to make arrests? And Arnott had grimly decided that arrests would come, anyway. "You've got to listen to me, Charley—hold back yore men a spell, and I'll show you Ticote Hurd on the nester side of the line, with Hildebrand and the sheriff!"

Apparently heedless, the Box A man spurred on, through the mud of the down trail, toward the bend. After a time he snapped a question: "Why send these men back?"

"To save needless bloodshed—"

"Bloodshed," scoffed Arnott. "You're still worried about nester blood."

"And ranger blood. I'm through, Charley!"

They struck the bosque trail, raced down-creek. Bursts of lightning flared on their course, vividly outlining trees and homestead area beyond. Wain tried once more. "You're not game, Charley, or you'd stake on Harvey Adams' blood!"

After a minute, as they neared the bend: "Yo'll show me Hurd, on the nester side?"

"If you hold back yore men—here! Bring the junta."

Arnott slid his bronco in the mud, halted the cavalcade. He conferred with a chosen few. "Danged funny Handsome ain't showed, or any of his men. I'm goin' to see somethin'. You want to go 'long?"

Only Bittick had caught part of the drift. "And let Adams frame us? Nada!"

"All right. I ain't afraid to see. I'm goin' alone. Want to know where I'm shootin', anyway!" That brought the others to his side. Arnott issued low orders to the riders. "Hang here, and don't shoot a nester, till we call for help."

Lightning blazed the both sides of the creek. "Somebody lied about them crossin'," grunted Arnott, as the six guardians of the range—minus Hurd—rode a hundred yards farther. "Better get our laigs here." They dismounted, screened their horses.

"Now, where?"

WAIN, without speaking, took the lead; alone of the group he was without a rifle. The bend lay directly ahead. Vivid lightning bore home the danger of their approach, in case of an ambush. Wain deployed into the bush. "We've got to find some chamiso. Wait here." He backed along the stream, now down to normal from the dam overflow, imperceptibly raised by the rain. His knife whacked at a lone evergreen bay sapling. Arnott crept up and gave a hand. In three minutes enough screening had been cut for each.

A light glowed at the Meiggs shack and a moving lantern flared and died. Forms of men were visible for the brief moment; they were making a stand, ready for the Annihilators.

"Now." Wain took the trail in the lead again, moved cautiously at the edge, behind the tree umbrella. At the bend, Hurd and Hildebrand and Dan Lilly were to meet. The hour was yet early, but the Ticote chief had sent word to bring the rangers on, and that meant he was ready. The night was inky black save for the less frequent lightning; the rain continued, but somewhat abated. Something stirred in the brush ahead, on the convex elbow of the creek bend, *on the cattlemen's side.*

A low warning from the little leader caused the moving brush screen to pause. Wain lifted out his six-shooter, cocked it. They waited, for five minutes; the Diamond Four man was about to forge ahead again. A white sheet of lightning flooded the bend. The leader smiled grimly. He had seen enough, but the ones behind him had not seen, through the series of leafy screens. Wain went back cautiously.

"Ticote and Hildebrand—together on our side of the creek," he whispered. "Now, Charley, you move out with yore umbrella; you, too, Nafe; we'll make a row, till the next streak comes."

Low voices. The musical tones of Hurd. "Nesters all waiting, ready—they'll give a hand the minute we start blazing."

Distinct enough the words came for all the junta to hear, convicting the erstwhile leader of the cowmen of high treason, in collusion with nesters. There was nothing yet to indicate Hildebrand's presence to Charley Arnott, but he had learned enough. No one spoke for minutes. Then the low crunch of boots sounded on the trail behind them. Wain turned swiftly, gun ready. He did not fire, for fear of betraying their presence. He heard Trig Malone's whisper. "It's me; there's a pair of men above us in the brush; what'll we do?"

Brush ripped and tore above them, with the pressure of heavy bodies; the soft plop of hoofs and the swift racing of horses drove to their ears. Wain dropped his evergreen shield in hot anger at the act of the punchers; he crouched, at the sharp, clear yell of Marshal Hildebrand:

"They're comin'! Get 'em!"

Pistols and rifles blazed, in a single volley. To the ears of the listeners came the cold, dry laugh, of Hildebrand, and the gruff bark of Sheriff Lilly:

"Yo're under arrest, Hurd, you and yore two buddies, for murder."

"Put 'em up!" sharp and insistent, from Hildebrand.

Wain Adams, amazed, bewildered, rode out into the trail; lightning flared again, on the instant that guns belched in the little dip that held officers and gunmen. As Wain sprinted forward, stabs of flame shot into the blackness from roaring six-shooters. A groan reached the ears of Wain and the men behind him, the sound of a running man or men, the creaking of leather and the splash of hoofs. "We'll get him!" came from the throat of Lilly. "Hold back them nesters, Henry!"

WAIN felt his way in the blackness, a few yards from the spot whence the firing had come. Someone struck a match; the cowman saw Henry Derrick, and that one little match revealed Hildebrand, in sitting posture and two still forms beside the muddy trail, in the rain. "What happened?" demanded Wain, reaching for another match.

"Yes, what in h—" Arnott struck a light.

"Tell those nesters to go back to bed, will you?" from Deputy Marshal Der-

rick. Wain approached Hildebrand; the match glare revealed a grim but white face. "Got me, half. I'm all right," said the marshal quietly. "Shoulder."

"Who got yuh?" from Arnott. "Why'd shoot at them riders?" He held the match close. Hildebrand shook his head. Derrick answered:

"Marshal and I have been watching you, Adams, and the big boy, Hurd, for months. Your guess was accurate about the gun that killed my brother. Searched Hurd twice, for that thirty-eight—not that he knew it. We watched every pocket, from the outside and in, watched for a shoulder holster. Searched you, too, same way. Didn't have much of a clue, till that raid night—I'll tell that story later. But we came with Hurd tonight, the sheriff with us, and when he pulled that thirty-eight, we started for him. Horses you heard weren't your punchers; we had two men back there stampede 'em through."

"But you didn't get Hurd!" shot out Wain Adams, taking a second look with another match at the two flat on the ground.

"Hurd started shooting minute he saw the trap—so did Paint Mustain, and the Mex was starting. The big un knocked the marshal; but he's all right. Those other two went down. Maybe the sheriff got one; Mister Hildebrand sure got the other—Hey you nesters!" he called across the creek. "War's over—nobody'll visit you tonight!"

Wain Adams was sprinting back through the rain and mud for the horse he had sidetrailed in the bosque; his hunch told him Dan Lilly would have a hard time finding Handsome Hurd; also it told him that the panther-man would not leave the Caracara without attempting to even the score with his hated enemy.

CHAPTER XXXI

Wain Rides Alone

RED-EYED, tight-lipped, slicker-gowned figures splashed through the rain and mud on lathered and water-glistening broncos from Spanish Creek bend to Lingo and the Double Spur. Cowpunchers and their bosses beat the bosque brush while wind soughed and lightning played, divided forces, combed the trail to the Spur, invaded the old Clay Shepard home buildings, galloped through the streets of Lingo, Providence and Old Town, searched the Maverick and Montana and the Silver Dollar. Sheriff Dan Lilly and his deputies had preceded them to Lingo, sticking to the theory that the fugitive would seek refuge in town. At the bend nesters had crossed on their work-horses and wagons, not to battle the cowmen, but to help in the hunt for the killer, under the leadership of J. B. and hairy Jake Meiggs. Henry Derrick, with nester aid, brought Hildebrand to town and a doctor. Wain Adams, five minutes behind the sheriff, rode into Lingo alone.

At the edge of the straggling cow-town, where a massive brick mansion stood apart from all other buildings in the center of a rye-grass lawn, dotted with graceful cottoneaster, tea tree and nandina, a heaving horse stood under the side veranda. Handsome Hurd had but a scant three minutes dismounted there. The door opened, a huge frame emerged, and behind it the pudgy figure of Barry Berg.

—"and you look after the Spur, Barry," Hurd was saying, in unhurried tones. "I'll draw on yore bank, wherever I am, till things blow over enough to fix matters with the senator. You can clean up later, on yore notes, and we'll win. That runt Adams is the only one that ever named us together; he's got to go—and he'll sure as hell look for me here. Play that fence-post telephone line you just put over—" He was in the saddle. "Lucky, lucky that little thing was done!"

He was referring to the recently installed community phone line connecting the bigger ranches with one another and a few centers in towns, including the bank and his residence. As the Ticote chief vanished in the blackness a clap of thunder rocked the house. Barry Berg banged the door, chuckling. "It couldn't be petter!" His short, fat legs took the stair, the second floor hallway, the flight above to the garret. He worked at an insulated wire and started back down. "It vill look like the lightning vas busy!" From the hall-rack he took

a slicker, drew one arm into it, and waited.

Wain Adams' pony hit the graveled driveway. Barry Berg slammed the front door, trotted out under the veranda light, pulled on his slicker. Wain went up the steps. "I'm looking for Ticote Hurd, Berg! Where is he?" His hand was on the butt of his holstered gun.

"Gott! Vat a night. I vas choost going to saddle up—"

"Hurd! Where is he?"

"Vat is the madder vit you, Vain. Miss Judy has proken her leg, falling on the stairway, and I vas chust on the vay—"

"Has Hurd been here?" snapped the cowman. "What's that about Judy Arnott?"

"Vat in the world vill happen next! Vhy do you van Handsome this time of night? No, he vas not here—vhy? My gracious—dat girl! Somepody must go—the telephone, it iss not vorking—to the Diamond Four. Dot lightning—donder!" He tripped, stumbled on the slippery steps, toppled in a heap to the walk beneath. "Oh, my angle! My angle!"

"You'll live." Wain gave him an arm. "What's this cock-and-bull story about Judy?"

"Oh, my! The telephone—ring. She say it iss Judy. Oh, my angle! Dot she could not get the older ranches? So she ring up me. Vit the lightning bolt, she stumble down the stairs and break her leg—choost enough strength she vas able to grawl to the telephone. Oh, my angle!"

"YOU'RE lying, Berg." Wain Adams' jaw hardened. "I'll phone her—and I'm going to search the house—and stick here till that killer arrives, savvy?" He shook off the clinging banker, leaving him to limp inside, darted to the telephone, rang the direct bell for the Box A. Minutes passed, while Wain watched the doorway into the hall, gun out for a surprise entry of Hurd. He tried the Diamond Four, gave it up; and made a swift and thorough search of the premises, not overlooking the stables, leaving Berg, moaning over his ankle.

He stood wrapped in his slicker in the rain under the veranda, listening for a horse, debating swiftly whether or not Barry Berg lied. There was the chance that the chase was too hot for Hurd to allow him to risk the Berg mansion; further, why should so elaborate a ruse be framed to drive him from the pursuit? Hurd would not take such pains—he would be too busy dodging a score of possemen.

And Wain decided Barry Berg did not have the brains to invent such a story. If Judy Arnott lay helpless, alone at the ranchhouse, with every man absent, with Maggie and Coe still on a visit miles away—if Judy were in that plight! The little cowman shuddered. Hunting Hurd in the black night was a needle-in-haystack job. Daylight the entire range would spread out, circle, and round him up—and Wain would be on the job with them then! He went to the saddle, swerved to the left through Lingo, found a posseman.

"Pronto, Dallas! Get a bunch around Barry Berg's place—watch for Ticote there!" He took the Box A trail, at a steady, distance-eating lope through the rain.

In the big living-room of the Arnott ranch home, lightless and without even the fitful glow of a fire, Handsome Hurd's musical woman-conquering tones broke the somber stillness:

"I'm a cowman, Judy, and wealthy. Couldn't help coming here, when all the folks were safe away; thought you might like it if I did. Better reconsider; put on yore duds; you're used to riding. Won't take us a day to hit the Dagger range. Ride to the foothills line camp; nobody's there. I'll catch up in an hour."

"I despise you."

"You don't mean it." He laughed easily at the click of the telephone receiver. "Phone's out—lightning. Once more, will you, or won't—" A crashing, spattering object struck the wall back of the gunman's head in the darkness.

He stepped forward, reached, pursued and caught her. "It's Wainey Adams you want," he droned easily. "But you'll go—with me when I tell you something. Wainey's coming to this house in the next hour. I'm here, waiting. He'll come to see how you broke your leg!" The man laughed. "He hasn't got a chance. Now will you go?"

There was no answer save her effort to free herself from his big paws. "Once

more, will you ride, like I told you, to save Wainey, or—"

The soft step of a horse brought him up with a swift decision. "Quicker'n I estimated. Now, girl, sit down." He forced her into a chair. "Right where you can see the show. When he strikes a match to light up, I'll—" He thrust his neckerchief into her mouth, tied it cruelly with his big saddle rope, across the tender face, brought the rope down around arms and ankles, knotted it with swift skill.

His big fingers went around a bound wrist, twisted it until the bone seemed to snap, twisted it again, until a low moan escaped through the gag. He glided back against the wall, crouched, the true pantherman, as a faint step sounded in the hall. In his right hand was the little thirty-eight, muzzle forward, and in the left the heavy forty-five.

CHAPTER XXXII

Wavering Guns

WAIN ADAMS was in the hallway, and he heard the cowgirl's moan, as Handsome Hurd had intended he should, to lend countenance to the deception that Judy Arnott lay a cripple from a fall. He had approached as noiselessly as possible, had opened the unlocked door without a sound, and he knew that his boot had fallen too heavily, once, upon the carpet of the hall passageway. Then he had removed both boots and advanced in his stockinged feet.

Riding through the storm, he had been torn by the fraction of a suspicion that remained about the message of Barry Berg, until as he proceeded the suspicion multiplied to the proportion of a hunch — a hunch like that which always seemed to guide him in the presence of danger. Hence when he arrived at the end of the Box A bunkhouse which a few hours before had been the rallying place for the range riders, now silent and vacant and dark, he dismounted at the first clap of hoofs on decomposed granite that might be heard as far away as the house.

Much as he feared the urgency might be of reaching Judy if she were the victim of an accident such as Berg described, he did not hurry to the house, but made a hasty examination of the premises, without. If the fugitive killer had been long-sighted enough to choose such a place as the home of one of the cowmen for refuge, he would expect to remain there for a very limited time, and his horse would be about, somewhere, saddled and ready for flight. Wain circled the bunkhouse and the horsesheds, listening for sounds that would betray an animal in the darkness. He gave more care to the corrals, and then rounded the dwelling.

When about to abandon the hunt and take Barry Berg's word for truth, a low whinny on the north side of the house reached his ears; he went cautiously the fifty yards to a cottonwood, and found the saddled animal. Slashing the cinch cords with his knife, he turned to the house, found back and side door barred, and proceeded carefully to the front and entered, dropping his long slicker.

After moving a few steps in his stockinged feet, he halted, listened again for a sound from Judy, but there was none. His fingers touched the papered wall, guided him to a door frame. Often he had visited the Arnott home; he knew the plan of the house; this particular doorway was the one that led into the living-room; from that room the stairway led to the second floor; here Judy must have fallen, if at all. If not, and Hurd had set a trap, here was the room where the scene would be enacted. Uncanny darkness and silence permeated everything about; no line of faint light marked where the upper glass panel of the door must be, no margin showed where the light wallpaper met the baseboard. The impulse to speak Judy's name and to hasten to her was checked by the very blackness and an indefinite something that the little cowman could not define. He thought of Hurd's horse.

He stooped low, and, bending, glided into the opening that was the doorway, left-hand guiding him, right-hand in easy pressure on the butt of his six-shooter, cocked and ready, forefinger at the trigger. His small stature and the bent attitude would make a low mark for an enemy lurking within. A board creaked under his stockinged feet, and he tensed, waited. Then he stepped cautiously to one side, just within the doorway, and drew himself slowly erect. His

feet went slightly apart, and he was ready. But he did not strike the match that Hurd awaited.

The thought that Judy had been alone at the mercy of the big blond for even a short period of time stirred the blood of the little cowman; luckily it must have been but a brief interval before Wain's arrival. Why had Hurd come here? Why was his horse outside, waiting? How had Hurd communicated with Barry Berg, if the banker had acted as decoy? These questions were unanswered, save for the conviction that Hurd was engaged in a fitting deed of cunning to match his long career of crime.

WAIN stood in tense expectancy, no muscle moving, even his breathing guarded. He felt a presence in the room; it might be Judy Arnott; it might be Hurd, or both. Once the fear overwhelmed the Diamond Four man that captive and captor might be in another part of the house; Judy might be in dire peril. But her moan had seemed to come from the living-room, and there the staircase was, and the supposed fall—or the trap. Luck had been with Wain in the whinny of the horse; why did not Hurd betray his presence by some sound—a sneeze, for instance?

No, the panther-man was playing the game, Wain Adams knew; and he was probably standing somewhere in the room with his deadly little thirty-eight unsheathed, the weapon that had slain Derrick, wounded Old Man Lea and last of all Marshal Hildebrand. Perhaps that weapon had helped to slay the six nesters who had fallen victim to the Ticote men, Hurd, Mustain, Teague and Gandara.

The crimes of the range invaders in recent months almost eclipsed in their impression on Wain the slaying of his own brother Bill in West River; of all of them, the taking of the life of the little nester girl seemed most atrocious, even though unplanned. A picture of the child on that fatal Saturday morning, happy and carefree, then cold from the yellow flood waters, remained uppermost as the cowman held his muscles taut, matching his physical being and his wits with Hurd, in the increasing tension of the Stygian chamber. A half hour passed.

Why did not Judy speak, or even moan now? Judy! What would happen to her, if Handsome Hurd should beat him with guns here in the darkness? Wain's wrist muscles relaxed, tensed, his fingers flexed. The pistol, heavy in this sustained position even to one accustomed to its use, wavered slightly. His wrist was tiring, with the weapon leveled. He sheated it with a smooth motion, and his arm hung limp, but ready for an instant flash to place. Grimly he hoped that Hurd were not as wise as he, in this.

Two minutes, by the ticking of the invisible mantel clock, three, five, six minutes, ears straining, eyes trying to pierce the raven gloom. And then it happened.

Lightning, a dual flash of it, in quick succession. A leaping, belching Colt from the hip of Wain, and a slumping body. That was all.

Not even a swapped shot from the crouched panther-man whose frame had been distinctly outlined against the farther wall; two guns, one a little thirty-eight locked about his fingers even as he lay, told the story a moment afterward when the Diamond Four man held a match, then lighted the big hanging lamp. Hurd had held his weapons in taut immobility until his wrists and fingers had cramped, frozen. Wain had rested his for the draw.

"Pure accident, luck, and—a hunch!" Wain was at Judy Arnott's side, as horses' hoofs plopped in the mud and rain outside. "Oh, Wain, Wain!" Her rope-numbed hands went to his. Boots thudded in the hallway. Charley Arnott bolted in, and his gun was cocked. The hall filled behind him.

"You got him!" Arnott breathed a prayer. "Judy, girl! All right!" She was standing, laughed in quiet happiness, bordering on hysteria. The sight of the great tawny beast outstretched upon the floor was not a pleasant one. Henry Derrick and three others carried him out. "How did you happen to come?" asked Wain Adams, of Arnott.

"Berg, Derrick and Dan here took him in custody. Ask Dan. Wainey, I'm shamed to look yuh in the face, boy." The Box A man's lips quavered. "After the things I said and done. If you'll ever consider me half-worthy again, I'll clean the mud off yore boots. Wisht you'd take my hand." He waited, until the little owner extended his, with a serious smile. Arnott grasped Wain Adams' gun-hand in his with a warmth that left no doubt of his innermost feeling. "Yeah," Dan

Lilly was talking. "Yeah, Berg confessed. Credit belongs to Hildebrand."

HE turned as Derrick re-entered. "And Mist' Derrick. I come over after they done the work, knowin' it was all ready but the brandin'. Danged if I'd come, either, till I found Wainey Adams and Charley Arnott wasn't mixed up in it no way!" He chuckled, in frank acknowledgment of his partisanship. "Tell 'em, Henry."

"You know it all, by now." Derrick unbuttoned his slicker. "Land office was onto dummy entrymen, on those abandoned river claims; we hooked Bingo Goodman up—he's in custody too, and Berg. Then Hurd, and the trails crossed with the killings. The marshal—his wound isn't serious—figured Ticote out, in league with Barry and Bingo, to grab the river, when the government moves for the dam—president favors it, too—and Hurd's game was to grab the cattle holdings on Spanish Creek with the homestead land. It'll be worth millions, when the dam comes." He grinned at Arnott and Wain. "See where you get off, with your ranch land?"

They saw but vaguely. "Berg cried like a baby; told us Hurd's play out here at Box A, and we hustled over. That's all, except Dishawn was asleep when Ticote crept out and shot my brother."

It wasn't quite all. Hide Burman wanted to know about the liability of the junta, in paying money to Bickers, Jolly and the other escaped gunmen.

"The marshal had those names spotted for phoney the minute Berg gave 'em over—"

"Phoney?"

"No such persons as Bickers, Manford, Jolly and House. That lets you out. The Ticote bunch worked that way!"

Which was news even to Wain Adams. Further questioning brought out the fact that the sheriff and Hildebrand had gone to the Double Spur that afternoon as part of the undertaking to incriminate Hurd. One other thing puzzled Wain. "How did Hildebrand know the same man that led the raid on the nesters killed Derrick?"

"The little bullet. We bumped into the raiders that night, thought they were nesters. One of 'em dropped a shot into my stirrup—a thirty-eight—from across the creek. When we got over, they were gone. Next morning we knew."

The rain passed, and the gloom, with the November and December days. But the moisture remained to green and deepen the range grass, enough to worry along until January saw the start of the Spanish Creek project. Judy and Wain rode the Caracara together, and they learned much from the nesters whose presence had doubled, trebled, quadrupled the value of their deed land; in torch-burning the spines from prickly pear for feed, in converting the soapweed into ensilage; in feeding cattle from irrigation hay and cottonseed cake—the new versus the old. A new bank came to Lingo and the cattlemen were their own directors.

"Nesters are showing us a lot of new tricks, Miss Judy," remarked Wain one day, shaking his head seriously.

"I believe it, Wain."

"Yeah, and now that doggone Ann Franklin and her beau William have cut their range in half, and got married."

Judy smiled.

THE END.

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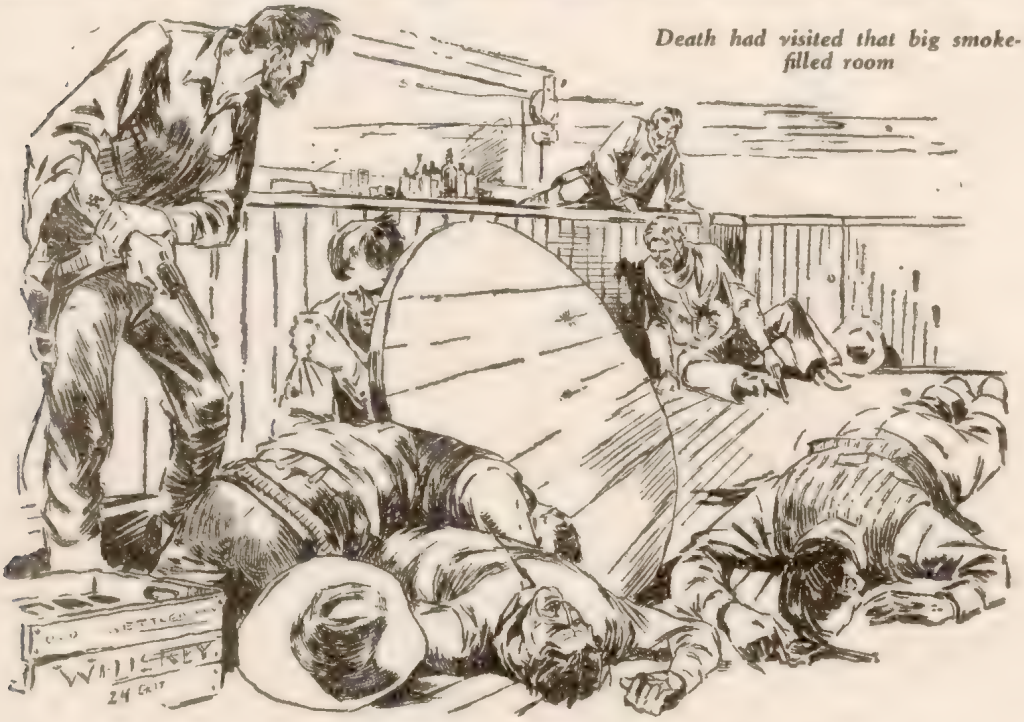
Satan's Segundo

by GUNNISON STEELE

Though he was a kill-mad gallows ghost, Flash Hayden back-tracked into that outpost of hell for the sake of a defenseless tenderfoot's dark-eyed bride. But poisoned whiskey numbed Hayden's gunhands and trail-marked the girl for a lead-throwing lunatic's living purgatory!



Death had visited that big smoke-filled room

MOUNTED on a powerful steel-dust gelding, his saddlebags bulging with loot taken from the gutted Jacktown bank, Flash Hayden rode recklessly toward the Thundergust hills. A grin of contempt for the enraged posse that roared on his backtrail curled the gaunt, red-haired renegade's thin lips. Thoughts of the bank cashier he'd killed an hour ago squirmed through his brain.

For Flash Hayden was a man of adverse natures—a man of sudden fierce passions that were apt to spawn some act of kindness, or a deed of brutish cruelty. It had been said of Flash Hayden that he once gave a widow a thousand dollars to pay off a mortgage, and that same night killed his best friend in a quarrel over a quart of whiskey! Satan's Segundo, some prairie wit had branded him, and the sobriquet was apt.

A strange, quiet man, pantherish despite his great size and strength. His eyes were yellow as a cougar's, his hawkish features marred by a livid knife scar from ear to chin. In all his perverse make-up Flash Hayden probably had but one redeeming quality—his unswerving respect for a good woman.

Hayden didn't look back as he rode across the plain. He knew he had outdistanced the law-posse that had snarled quickly on his trail. He knew he could find safety in the rough Thundergust hills if he could reach them.

The red sun was lowering toward those jutting blue hills. The big gelding ran easily, but the fast pace had tired him. The hills were yet forty miles away. But Flash Hayden knew a place on the edge of the foothills that jutted out many miles from the highlands, where he could rest for a while and get a fresh mount if he wanted it—for a price.

A few miles ahead was Seth Tarn's whiskey station. Tarn was supposed to be a rancher, but his place was really an outlaw hideout. His big log ranchhouse afforded a bar, a place to eat and sleep for those who came his way. Those customers were almost invariably those fast-riding, quick-shooting hombres who rode the gun-trails, men who paid Seth Tarn's murderous prices for his protection and vile whiskey, and rode away to curse his memory. To Tarn's place came wanted men, murderers, thieves—desperate, black-souled men who lived like wolves by the savage law of gun and claw and fang.

And to Seth Tarn's place this night, a blood-hungry posse raging on his back-trail, came Flash Hayden.

Darkness had slid down like a velvet curtain, and a chill wind was snaking among the foothills, when the big outlaw reached Tarn's place. Clutching a money-filled buckskin bag in one hand, Flash Hayden stalked into the wide front room of the big log structure. A kerosene lamp swinging from the ceiling illumined the room, which had been made into a combination bar, gambling den and dining room. At one end was a high wooden bar. Tables dotted the room.

FLASH HAYDEN paused just inside the doorway, his tawny eyes sweeping the room. Seth Tarn, a squat, hook-nosed man with phlegmatic black eyes and a bristly black beard, stood behind the bar. Four other men besides Tarn were in the room. The four, all gun-belted, evil-faced gents, sat playing stud poker at one of the tables.

Ignoring the four, who appraised him with cold, suspicious eyes, Flash Hayden strode to the bar. Seth Tarn grinned and licked his thick lips, as he looked at Flash Hayden, and something that might have been hate or fear crawled in his dull eyes. And Seth Tarn both hated and feared Flash Hayden.

"If it ain't Flash Hayden," Tarn said loudly. "How, Flash?"

"A bottle of whiskey," Flash Hayden clipped shortly. "Then somethin' to eat."

Tarn looked slyly at the bulging bag. "Sure, Flash. But no need to hurry. You're safe here."

"Whiskey!" Hayden said harshly.

Seth Tarn sloshed whiskey into a dirty glass from a jug. Flash Hayden downed the fiery liquid at a quick, fierce gulp.

"Somethin' to eat—and I'm in a hurry!"

Aware of a peculiar silence and tension in the room, Flash Hayden turned slowly back to the bar. The four men at the table sat fingering their cards, staring with greedy, calculating eyes at Flash Hayden and the stuffed money sack.

Flash Hayden shrugged contemptuously, turned deliberately and strode to another table and sat down. He knew these four, and they knew and respected him. The lithe, dark-faced, flashily dressed hombre was Nick Scarlett, leader of one of the toughest outlaw gangs west of the Missouri. Nick Scarlett's clothes were jaunty and flashy, but he was deadly as a mad puma. His three followers were less showy, but just as deadly.

Nick Scarlett was proud of his dark handsomeness. And that was why he hated Flash Hayden so fiercely. Once Nick Scarlett and Flash Hayden had clashed. On that occasion, Flash Hayden had taken the swaggering killer's guns away from him, given him a savage beating with his fists. Then, deliberately, Flash Hayden had slashed a trench across Scarlett's dark face with a keen-bladed knife, leaving a livid scar that he would carry to his grave.

Impatiently, Flash Hayden waited for Tarn to bring the food. He was aware of the hate in Nick Scarlett's inky eyes, of the greed in the eyes of the other ruffians as they looked at the bulging bag. But that worried him little. He knew that the posse would be clinging grimly to his trail, bent on earning the huge bounty that his capture meant. Flash cursed Seth Tarn's slowness, knowing that he should be riding on toward the rough Thundergust hills.

The front door of the barroom opened into a wide hallway. Flash Hayden sat facing this door, so he saw the two as they entered. Swift amazement struck at Flash Hayden, but his cold, hawkish features remained expressionless.

A boy and a girl. The young fellow couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. He was dressed in silk shirt wide-brimmed white hat and shiny boots. The girl, younger even than the boy, was dressed in corduroy trousers and jacket. She was slim, dark-haired, pretty.

The two paused an instant just inside

the doorway. Shadowy fear was in the girl's dark eyes as she pressed close against the youth and looked at the hard-faced men in the room. The boy smiled reassuringly at her. Then they crossed the room to the table that was nearest Nick Scarlett and his raiders and seated themselves. The boy motioned to Seth Tarn.

Questions beat at Flash Hayden's brain. What were these two doing here, of all places, in Seth Tarn's hell-hole? City was stamped plainly on the tall, dudishly dressed youth. Quite obviously, he was new to the range country. The girl was pretty, unspoiled, with restless fear in her innocent eyes.

Flash Hayden shrugged, turned his eyes away. It was no affair of his. He had no time to worry about other folks, even if one of them was a slim, dark-haired girl.

Seth Tarn brought food, and placed it with a smirking grin on the table before Flash Hayden. Then he waddled like a black spider over to the table where the boy and girl sat. Flash saw him stare with open, leering admiration at the girl —saw the girl shrink away from him, instinctive revulsion in her young eyes.

A THIN thread of anger ran through Flash Hayden, a quick impulse to kill Seth Tarn for his insolence. But he thrust the impulse aside, and started eating. From the tail of his eye he watched as Tarn swaggered into a back room and returned with food, which he placed before the boy and girl.

The girl ate with lowered eyes, obviously aware of the bold stares of Nick Scarlett and his henchmen. Flash Hayden ate slowly, deliberately waiting. Several times, as the flirtatious attempts of Nick Scarlett and his cut-throats grew more open, the girl glanced with frightened, bewildered eyes across at the gaunt, redhaired gunman. But, each time, Flash Hayden looked away, pretending not to notice.

He had no time, Flash Hayden told himself, to become mixed in a brawl over a couple of fool kids who should have had more sense than to be here in the first place. The hills were yet twenty miles away, and the lawdogs were closing in. He was a fool for staying even this long.

But he lingered over his food, watching. Flash Hayden was a *malo hombre*, a killer several times over. But the evil in his barbaric heart had never crowded out his reverence for a good woman nor his love for fair play. It was his one iron creed.

And into the game against this smooth-faced youth and the slim,red-lipped girl had been slicked a stacked deck. Nick Scarlett and his gang had known these two were here, had been waiting for their appearance when Flash arrived. The fates of these two youngsters, Flash knew, had already been decided. . . .

Flash Hayden's eyes chilled suddenly. Nick Scarlett had got to his feet. Had gone over and, after a sweeping bow, seated himself at the table with the boy and girl. He was speaking, too softly for Flash to hear his words, a smirking grin on his dark, cruel features.

Flash Hayden saw the sudden alarm that leaped into the eyes of the two, saw them look quickly at him, and knew what Nick Scarlett had been saying. The big renegade smiled sardonically. Now that the girl knew what he was, maybe she would turn her pleading eyes toward him no more. She would choose what she considered the lesser of the two evils—Nick Scarlett!

But she didn't. As Scarlett continued to speak softly, the resentful flush left the boy's face, and several times he laughed loudly at something the dudish outlaw leader had said. But the girl's natural intuition saw deeper than the boy's eyes. The fear deepened to terror in her eyes. From time to time, as Nick Scarlett talked and ogled her boldly, she turned her dark eyes toward Flash Hayden.

Flash Hayden grinned raggedly. Satan's Segundo, they'd called him, and with good reason. A man who had no friends, nor wanted any. A hard, mean gent who had killed more times than he remembered.

And now he sat like a stubborn jackass, because a crooked deck had been slipped into the game against a clear-eyed girl!

A wave of self-derision swept through him. But he couldn't still the warring emotions in his heart.

Flash Hayden rose suddenly to his feet, seized the money bag from the table and stalked bitter-eyed to the bar. Seth Tarn, watching with his snake-dull eyes, reached eagerly for the whiskey jug. But Flash Hayden shook his tawny head.

"Directly," he said, and jerked his head toward a back door.

Quick alarm in his round eyes, Seth Tarn followed the tall gunman into the shadowy back room.

"Them two babes in the woods," Flash clipped. "Who are they, and what're they doin' here?"

Tarn shrugged thick shoulders, grinned. "Just a coupla drifters. Don't you go jumpin' at conclusions, Flash. Them two know all the ropes—"

"The truth, you fat spider, or I'll slit your throat!" Flash Hayden said flatly.

TARN recoiled from the stark savagery in Flash Hayden's cold eyes. "The boy's name's Jim Barry. The girl's his wife—they just been married a few days. They were drivin' through the country in a buckboard, on their way to Sangaroon where he's got an uncle. They're new to the West, so they got lost. Then they saw my place, and stopped and asked if they could stay all night. I couldn't refuse a little thing like that, could I?"

"Maybe you'll wish you had!"

"Now wait a minute, Flash," Tarn whined. "You better not horn into this play. If you do Nick Scarlett'll kill yuh, 'cause he's made up his mind to get the girl. It won't be the first girl he's stolen and carried into the hills. Besides, ain't nothin' I kin do. I don't want no trouble here. You don't aim to horn in, do you, Flash?"

"No!" Flash Hayden said fiercely, with sudden decision. He whirled and went back into the barroom.

Tarn followed him, a sly, satisfied grin curling his thick lips. "Take it easy, Flash," he said. "I'll take care of you."

"I'll take care of myself," Flash rapped. "Whiskey!"

Eagerly, Tarn seized the jug and sloshed more of the vile whiskey into the glass. Flash Hayden lifted the glass and gulped a deep swallow of the stuff.

Then, savagely, he smashed the glass against the bar. Fierce, savage anger leaped into his yellow eyes, and lashed out at Seth Tarn like a thing alive. Tarn, quick terror supplanting the evil triumph that had seeped into his dull eyes, cowered back against the wall.

"Blast you, Tarn," Flash Hayden's passions speared furiously out at him. "I'll teach you to dope my whiskey!"

"Wait, Flash!" Tarn gibbered. "Yuh got me wrong. I didn't. . . ."

Like a leaping black spider, Seth Tarn slid to one side, grabbing desperately for the gun on his hip. A red funnel of flame spewed across the bar, a gun-shot roared out, and Tarn wilted to the floor, the hate and vicious triumph draining from his snakish eyes as he died.

Flash Hayden whirled, back to the bar, gun-muzzle sweeping the room. He was conscious of a slow mist clouding his brain, of a fiery twisting in his stomach, and knew that even the small amount of doped whiskey that he'd swallowed was having its effect. Fresh anger tore like a raging wind through his heart.

Silence held the big room. The boy and girl sat tense, seemingly bewildered by what was happening. A triumphant sneer curled Nick Scarlett's thin lips as he looked at Flash Hayden.

"You put that spider up to this, Scarlett," the gunman ripped out harshly. "Didn't have the guts to face me fair, even with your wolves at your back, did you? Well, all the cards ain't out in this game yet. Some day, I'll kill you for this!"

Stiff-legged, gun in one hand and money sack in the other, Flash Hayden backed to the door. The deadly drug in the whiskey was clutching with black fingers at his brain. The room reeled crazily before his eyes. Only one thing stood out clearly — the white, terror-haunted face of the girl.

Flash Hayden turned, staggered into the night. Dazedly, he reeled to the big gelding, pulled himself into the saddle, and the night swallowed him as he spurred wildly away.

After riding furiously for a mile. Flash slowed the big gelding. He rode stiff in the saddle, clutching the saddle-horn for support. Fiercely he fought the drug that was trying to pull him from the saddle.

Chaos gripped his mind. Clashing emotions roiled in his heart. Memory of the young girl's white face and wide, pleading eyes fought with the knowledge that somewhere in the night, not far away now, a law posse was closing in on him. Already, perhaps, others had whipped in between him and the hills.

Flash Hayden cursed bitterly, and rode on. He was alternately hot and cold. Nausea tore at his stomach. A

dark mist, agitated by fierce winds, seemed to swirl in his brain. But he never lost consciousness.

A chill night wind washed against his face, driving out some of the mist. But bleak, bitter reverie still moulded his hard face into a somber mask.

ONCE Flash Hayden had killed a drunken miner for an insulting word spoken to a dance hall flossie. And yet he was riding away, the picture of a bewildered, frightened girl swimming in his mind, leaving that girl in the evil, merciless clutches of a human wolf — Nick Scarlett.

Flash Hayden grinned sardonically in the darkness. Satan's Segundo. . . . The words beat in his tired brain. Flash thought of the men he had killed.

But he could remember no time when he failed to drag his guns in defense of a woman. . . .

Flash Hayden stopped the gelding suddenly. Abruptly his brain was clear, cold, calculating. He knew he should be racing on toward the hills. He knew that it meant almost certain death to return to Tarn's place—if not from Nick Scarlett's wolves, then from the posses that were hemming in. Only in the dark hills lay safety.

But now indecision no longer tormented Flash Hayden's mind. He whirled the gelding suddenly, sent him pounding back through the night. . . .

His gaunt, sinister figure filled the doorway of the barroom. He stood there on wide-spread legs, shoulders hunched forward as his cold eyes probed about the room.

Already Nick Scarlett had dropped his mask of suavity, had bared his fangs. Young Jim Morgan sat with head and shoulders draped limply across the table, blood streaming from a gash on his forehead. The youth was unconscious.

Nick Scarlett and his three henchmen stood at the bar, talking and laughing with ribald glee, glasses of raw whiskey upraised in their filthy hands. The dudish Nick Scarlett was holding the girl in his arms.

The girl, terror-stricken, fought desperately, despairingly. She fastened her white teeth in Scarlett's shoulder. Nick Scarlett squalled with pain, swung his open palm against the girl's face.

Flash Hayden's voice, ragged with unchained passions, lashed across the room: "Scarlett, a gent that'll do that ain't fit to live!"

The four men at the bar whirled, stark surprise wiping the evil merriment from their faces. The girl twisted from Scarlett's grasp, ran toward the renegade.

Flash Hayden flung her fiercely aside, never taking his eyes from the four before him. The girl, sensing that a holocaust of flame and lead was about to explode in that room, slid through the doorway into the corridor.

A blazing gun-battle exploded in a cyclonic burst of fury. Guns thundered out their ragged red dirge of death. Searing tongues of powder-flame criss-crossed the room as Flash Hayden —gunman, killer, feared and hated even by his own kind—stood, a sardonic grin pulling his thin lips, and faced Nick Scarlett's gun-slicks in a gun-duel.

Bitter gunsmoke roiled thick in the room that was interlaced with scarlet ropes of flame. Gun-thunder rolled like drum beats through the low hills. . . .

Ten minutes later, drawn by the blasting guns, a dozen possemen, led by a rawboned old sheriff, dragged their mounts to a halt at Tarn's place. A white-faced, frightened girl ran out to meet them, telling a fantastic tale. The rawboned old sheriff led his possemen into the big, smoke-fogged room.

Death greeted them. Nick Scarlett and his three gunnies were dead. Flash Hayden—dead. Young Jim Barry had regained consciousness, and now he took his dark-eyed young bride in his arms.

The old sheriff ordered the bodies taken into the open. Then he gathered kindling, stuck a match to it, and a while later a writhing red tongue of flame roared up as Seth Tarn's place burned.

The bodies of Nick Scarlett and his henchmen were carried out to Jacktown for burial, and the rewards that had been offered for their capture collected.

But they buried Flash Hayden out there in the shadowy, silent hills, and the huge bounty that was offered for his capture, dead or alive, was never collected. At the head of the lonely grave the old sheriff placed a wooden slab.

And with a live firebrand he wrote:

FLASH HAYDEN
HE LIVED A WOLF
BUT HE DIED A MAN

Wild Bunch Reunion

by ED EARL REPP

Author of "Wild Bunch Wipeout," etc.

To save their wounded saddlemate from performing an air jig for a bogus badge-toter, Butch Cassidy and his owlhoot pack fogged into a main street gun gauntlet—where a score of crooked lawdogs hungered for Wild Bunch bounty!

His twin guns sang boothill songs

THE flickering flames of the tiny supper fire washed the four renegade faces with pale light, accentuating their rugged, predatory lines. Four pairs of bleak eyes watched the ebb and flow of the embers, or eyed suspiciously the shadows that danced up and down the piñon aisles. A mulligan of hamhocks and beans bubbled gurglingly on the coals, permeating the still Wyoming air with pungent aroma.

The hidden camp there underneath the scarps of the Grand Tetons was charged with tension. No word was spoken. Lips were taut lines across clamped teeth as the three members of the Hole-In-The-Wall Gang and their giant, tawny haired leader hunkered about the fire, silently mourning a missing compadre. Concern etched minute lines on their bronzed features and there was a deadliness in their attitudes suggesting bull rattlers coiled and ready to strike. The profound silence of the Tetons brimmed over. The absence of the Merino whose ready wit had always kept them smiling shadowed the four long riders. All knew that he lay near death in the Painted Rock jail, victim of a ruthless lawdog whose policy was to shoot a man in the back before snapping on the irons.

All stiffened as a timber wolf suddenly bayed at the moon from the bosque of the Snake River. Four pairs of hands darted gunward, then relaxed. Ben Kilpatrick shuttled pale eyes from one set face to the other . . . drawling Ben whose law dodger described him as the Tall Texan who spoke slow and shot fast. His willowy body was taut as a bowstring as his glances probed the others around him.

Kid Curry hunkered nearby, his sombre eyes reflecting the fire-glow like small, onyx mirrors. The law pegged him Harvey Logan, a mere youngster, beardless, yet a seasoned rider of owlhoot trails and noted for his gun wizardry. Next to him, Harry Longabaugh alias Sundance Kid, Butch Cassidy's right bower in rodding this Hole-In-The-Wall Gang. The flickering firelight brought out the sharpness of his features, giving him a hawk-like appearance. He expended nervous energy and agitation by rasping his thumb constantly across the filled loops of his cartridge belt.

Just across the fire, Butch Cassidy studied the ebb and flow of the glowing embers. He was a tawny-haired giant. His leonine head sat on a thick, corded neck. Hunched forward, his mightily-thewed shoulders challenged the power of a Teton grizzly. Born George Parker, the slumbering strength in his great arms had once awakened to crush the life from a bullying, wife-beating mucker boss in the Cripple Creek gold diggings, thus outlawing him to society.

His facial muscles corded and knotted as he put his finger on the pulses of his men. Their unrest was growing hourly. He felt the impact of their eyes upon him, searching, questioning . . . condemning his seeming indifference to the circumstances. A faint, almost imperceptible quiver of his full lip betrayed his own tension and mental turmoil. Impatience, he knew, makes men reckless. Like a wolf mothering her cubs, he waited for some of the existing danger to pass before letting them play in the open. Lawdogs were yapping close by. . . .

NOW, the Tall Texan scooped up a tin plate, grabbed the wooden ladle in the pot and savagely slammed himself a mess of beans. He didn't sit down. His hands trembled slightly as he fished a spoon from an inner pocket and hoisted a generous bite to his thin mouth. He took just one scornful sniff. Then he was hurling plate, beans and spoon into a thicket.

"Beans!" he cracked out savagely. "Beans! All we've had tuh eat in three weeks! Damn if I ain't begun shellin' 'em in my sleep! Gawd, what I wouldn't. . . ."

The chill, mirthless voice of Kid Curry cut in to take the words from his mouth: ". . . give fer a brace uh fried chicken, cream gravy, corn pone an . . . nice, juicy apple pie with sugar an' cinnamon baked brown on top!" He licked his lips and glanced covertly at Butch. Muscle-knots grew along the giant's rugged jaws.

"Or a double-thick T-bone smothered in onions," murmured Sundance.

The Texan swore softly. "A brace uh gut-shootin' lawdogs'd do a heap better!" he ground out. He scythed fiery eyes on the giant. "How about it, Butch? How long yuh aim tuh keep us loafin' here an' eatin' beans whilst they're holdin' our pard, the Merino, in Painted Rock? You know they're only patchin' 'im up so's they can give 'im an air jig soon's he's able tuh stand!"

Butch Cassidy rose to his full height, spread his huge hands deprecatingly. He smiled through the hurt of his angular face. Staunch friends, these gun-hung youngsters. Men who would charge hell's fires with a thimble of water to save a pard from disaster.

He said: "You ain't foolin' me none, boys. It ain't the beans yo're beefin' at. But yo're rowelin' me cruel with yore hooraw, challengin' my judgment an' leadership. It galls me sore, too, them belly-crawlin' lawdogs cornerin' the Merino an' tryin' tuh axe him off at the middle. But they're doin' him . . . an' us . . . a big favor keepin' 'im under the doc's care in Painted Rock . . . even iffen they are nussin' him for a public hangin'. . . ."

Three trail-toughened bodies stiffened. Kid Curry and Sundance leaped to their feet. "Then we're goin' tuh get 'im?" the Kid queried eagerly.

"Patience, men," intoned Butch, "is the essence uh life jest now as the feller says. Merino is my friend, like you three. We couldn't do for 'im what the sawbone's done. He'd a died. I'm playin' both ends agin the middle tuh save him an' us from what lies in wait in Painted

Rock. Since Hype Ringo took Merino, the town's become so full uh tinstars yuh'd think they was havin' a lawdog's convention. Ringo musta deputized every cutbank killer in the Tetons tuh side 'im. They're playin' a double game too . . . nussin' Merino fer a air jig an' hopin' we'll come tryin' tuh git 'im. They'd cut us down like a scythe through wheat soon's we showed up."

"You didn't tell us that," muttered the Texan darkly, a strange admixture of loyalty and anger in his pale eyes.

Again the silence of the Tetons gushed in for a moment. Sundance kept rasping his thumb across his cartridges. Kid Curry chewed on his lower lip. The Tall Texan stared expressionlessly at the bubbling mulligan.

Flatly, concisely, Butch spoke again: "So that's why . . . beans. Sheriff Ringo's got his tin freighters staked out in every store, waitin' fer us. If we showed up, they'd most likely rub out Merino first. We're four agin twenty . . ."

"Ringo's a snake!" scourged Sundance.

"Six stinks worse'n a hydrophobia skunk!" echoed the Kid.

"I've heard uh the jigger afore," growled Kilpatrick. "He was run outa Texas fer forcin' little nesters tuh pay 'im tribute tuh protect their stock from rustlers. Bled 'em dry, an' cleaned 'em out anyway. Now he's a perfessional bounty hunter. I hear tell he owns jest about all uh Painted Rock an' uses a fake star tuh take what he ain't got! Jest a' unlicensed lawdog, I reckon, that needs muzzlin'."

A hardness that was brittle settled over Cassidy's face. His lips drew down at the sides. The three knew the signs. This was it . . . the end of the long wait. As if unseeing, his bleak, cobalt eyes scythed over them. "Reckon that settles it," he bit out. "Three weeks is long enough tuh wait. Reckon Merino can be moved safely now. It'll be a chore takin' 'im, but . . ."

"Let's go git 'im!" broke in Sundance. "Ringo's the kind that'd hang 'im fer bounty iffen he had tuh hog-tie 'im to a wagon tongue tuh make him stand on the jig-rack!"

"He gut-shot him where the suspenders crossed whilst he was gettin' our mail," murmured the Kid. "Twenty tuh four! Even fight!"

Butch smiled grimly. Twenty to four! Even fight! That exemplified the daring courage of these reckless youngsters who relied upon him for leadership and counsel. Men to ride the river with, Sundance, Kid Curry, the Tall Texan and . . . the Merino whose identity had long since been lost on dim trails.

"Tonight," said the giant with a softness of voice that was wicked. "We take 'im an' put lead muzzles on Painted Rock lawdogs! C'mon!"

The supper of beans was forgotten now in the dash for mounts screened behind a cedar thicket. Ahorse, Butch roared down the piñon aisles at the head of his hard-bitten crew. Sundance gigged at his right flank, Kid Curry at his left. The Tall Texan took up the rear. There was no deviation from the straight in the drive toward Painted Rock. They knew every inch of the ground, lit now with a blue monotone of moonlight. Little was said until they curbed their lathered ponies on a timbered spur overlooking the town.

THE three fanned out about their giant leader and looked down upon Painted Rock, an ugly scatteration of clapboard buildings in the center of Whistling Skull Valley. The town glittered with light. Butch chuckled acridly: "You'd think we was moths the way they're tryin' tuh attract us with light, or Ringo an' his tinstars are afraid uh the dark!"

"Yella curs always hug the brightest spots," drawled the Texan coldly. "Well, it's goin' tuh be muzzlin' time in Painted Rock!"

"After we eat," clipped Butch, and laid out his plans. "Kid, you and Sundance go inta town from the north side. Me'n Ben'll come in from the south. We'll meet at the big frame house sittin' amongst them sycamores jest this end uh town. A nice ol' lady lives there. She keeps some chickens. Reckon she makes swell apple pies, too. Let's go!"

Eagerly they gigged on. The guttering lights of the town beat up at them. Autumn nights fall fast in the shadows of the Tetons. It wasn't late. Yet Painted Rock seemed to be hitting a high pace with all its lights turned on full. They gleamed like massed diamonds in an ebon setting. The longriders knew why . . . poor light makes for poorer shoot-

ing. Ringo awaited renegade visitors . . .

Just on the edge of the town, Cassidy drew rein. Kilpatrick curbed cruelly at his side. Together they keened the air like questing cougars. Before them the brilliantly lighted street was deserted except for a score or so ponies tethered at the various tie-racks. The giant murmured frigidly: "Lotta good oil goin' tuh waste. Jest like I said . . .they think we're moths, an' honin' fer us tuh come git scorched!"

"It's them that'll git burned," clipped the Texan. "Bet they's a lawdogbristlin' at every window an' door ready tuh cut loose on anyone suspicious."

They rowelled into the deep shadows beneath the sycamores in the rear of the big house, and lit down. The house was the only two-story structure in town. It sat majestically and aloof from the false-fronts scattered about it as if too proud to mix with them. In its day it must have been a fine mansion, where a man of wealth and affluence would install his lady love. Now, its towering gables were warped, unkept. Only the lower floor seemed tenanted. The upper was dark.

As they studied it, the two longriders saw a motherly old lady hustling about in the kitchen. Her hair was white. Frequently she paused in her work to dab at faded eyes with a tiny handkerchief. Her kindly face was deeply seamed. She was only as big as a minute, yet seemed a bundle of dynamic energy as she moved about.

Butch had a sudden vision of a kindly old lady like her . . . his mother. He hadn't seen her in years. Sadness ignited within him, brought a choking lump to his throat. He sighed softly, nudged the Texan. "We'll knock on the back door," he murmured huskily.

They matched strides across the yard. A hound dog scruffed growlingly toward them, the hair bristling on its neck. A soft, kindly word from Butch brought him scampering up. He patted the beast's head. Then he was knocking lightly on the door.

Carrying a kerosene lamp, the little old lady answered. She wasn't afraid. Her seamed, worried face lit in welcoming smile. "Good evening," she husked, searching them with warm, blue eyes, faintly red-rimmed now from crying.

"Evenin', ma'am," returned Butch. "Sorry tuh bother yuh. Me'n my pard here reckoned we mightn't be too late tuh eat with yuh. Heard tell yuh feed travelin' men sometime."

"'Deed I do, gentlemen," she beamed, unlatching the screen door. "I've had to do something since . . . John died two years ago." A catch constricted her throat. She swallowed with difficulty. "Won't you come in? You could have used the front door, you know."

"Thanks kindly, ma'am," said Butch. "We jest happen tuh like the dark tonight. Light hurts our eyes."

She ushered them into an orderly dining room, their spurs clanking dully on the dustless floor. "It's a shame the way Sheriff Ringo makes everyone keep their lights on these nights," she complained as they went, eyeing them minutely. "So much light! He expects some bandits to come after one of their friends who's been shot an' arrested. He's the kind who waits for outlaws to come to him instead of hunting them out. Just as cowardly as he is heartless, I reckon."

"Who's he expectin', ma'am?" drawled the Texan, glancing covertly at Butch.

"I think it's the Butch Cassidy gang," she answered softly. "Ringo already shot one of them, I think they call him Merino. Poor boy. He must have a mother somewhere. They're going to hang him as soon as he gets well. But here . . . you boys must be starving. I expected several patrons tonight. They didn't come. I've fried chicken and apple pie keeping hot in the oven. Does that sound good "

"Elegant," murmured Butch. "We'll take all yuh got, ma'am, an' pay yuh well too. Two friends uh ours'll be along soon. You wouldn't mind. . . ."

The thin, quavering hoot of an owl lifted from the sycamores, echoed through the house. Ma Rockette gave a start. The longriders grinned.

"Those owls always give me the shivers," the old lady smiled shakily. "They roost in the gables."

A knock sounded on the rear door. She bustled away to admit Sundance and Kid Curry.

DROPPING the bare framework of half a chicken on his cleaned plate, Butch Cassidy glanced at Ma Rockette

who hovered over the table with steaming coffee pot. "Finest meal we ever et, ma'am," he praised her. "What makes yuh cry every little while like that?"

"I can't help it. This is my last night in this old house. John Rockette . . . that's my husband, you know . . . built it for us when we were married years ago," she gushed in a swift torrent of words she couldn't hold back. "Our honeymoon was spent here. The town grew around us . . . killed poor John with bad luck and worse liquor. Sheriff Ringo is coming tonight to evict me for nonpayment of taxes. I offered to work it out scrubbing floors in the jailhouse, but he says I must go in the morning. And . . . Oh, how I hate to leave. I love this place, could make a nice living serving meals, too, if they'd let me. . . ."

She broke off with a deep sob. The anguish in her voice startled the four renegades. Sundance set his cup down so hard it cracked the saucer. Fire leaped into the Texan's pale eyes. A low oath shot from Butch's throat before he could check it. She looked at him hopelessly, just a bundle of trembling grief in gingham now, her eyes afloat in tears.

"That's a new kinda lawdoggin' in this country, Miz Rockette," said the twany-haired giant. "Hell! Taxes is for dudes east uh the Rockies, not fer homestead folks out here in a free land."

"It's free no longer," Ma Rockette sobbed, placing the coffee pot down and dropping limply onto a horse hair sofa to cover her face with her handkerchief. "Not since Hype Ringo came here with his pack of dogs and set himself up as lord and master of all he surveyed."

"How much does he claim yuh owe, ma'am?" Sundance cracked out.

"Nine hundred dollars," the old lady sobbed, "an' I haven't nine cents of it!"

"Nine . . . hundred . . . dollars?" Butch gasped. "Boys, I reckon we better start lawdoggin'! Heap more profitable than. . . ." His cobalt eyes grew hard. "Looks like the ol' razzle dazzle . . . the strong feedin' offen the weak. My last chip says that jigger is puttin' the dinero in his own pocket."

"Hype's same o' game with a new angle," growled the Tall Texan. "Was he elected sheriff here, ma'am?"

Ma Rockette laughed bitterly through her tears. "Hype Ringo elected?" she gave back. "Men don't elect snakes to public office. He just came with his gunmen a year ago and handed the real sheriff, Chris Hildreth, a letter from Governor Gardner relieving him from duty. Ringo's been sheriff ever since. Painted Rock writhes under his heels. I'm not the only one. To complain means quick death or eviction from our homes. Now, winter's comin' on. I have no friends to turn to when he kicks me out."

She broke down again. Butch bit his lips savagely. His cobalt eyes shuttled over the lamp-washed faces of the others. Each nodded in turn as if reading his mind. He turned, laid his huge hand on Ma Rockette's quaking shoulder.

"You got more friends'n yuh think, ma'am," he muttered. "Jest stick out yore chin an' sit tight. I don't reckon Hype's gonna like this country from here on out. Now, Miz Rockette . . . yuh mentioned a feller named Merino. We happen tuh be friends uh his. Know where Ringo's got him stowed away?"

Her head jerked up, red-rimmed eyes narrowing. She gave a slight start, then relaxed again, smiling weirdly. "Yes," she said, controlling her emotions. "He's in a cell in the jailhouse. Poor lad. They say he's badly hurt. You couldn't get to him. I tried . . . had baked him a cake."

The four looked upon her with new warmth. She had tried to comfort their pard. Butch muttered. "Thanks, ma'am. As friends uh Merino, we're beholdin' to yuh."

Kid Curry's face grew sombre. His chair scraped as he rose and left the room for a moment. When he returned, they were ready to leave. "Time's wastin'," he clipped. Butch nodded, pressed a wad of currency into Ma Rockette's hand.

"For the finest meal we ever had, Miz Rockette," he chuckled.

Her faded eyes bugged as she beheld the money. It taxed her small, shaking hand. "But," she stammered. "I couldn't accept all this for just . . . four meals."

"Forget it," murmured Butch. "Pay the lawdog. . . ."

Then the four were coyoting toward the back door as heavy footsteps rattled the boards on the front porch. Ma Rockette offered up a fervent prayer of thanks and admitted the swart, scowling lawman.

IN the shadow pools beneath the sycamores, Kid Curry pulled a little bundle of clothing from under his coat. Then he was swiftly slipping into one of Ma Rockette's sombre wrappers. He pulled a sun bonnet over his head, bent his shoulders and hobbled about for the inspection of his friends. They laughed softly, puzzled.

"An' what are yuh up to, ma'am?" chuckled Sundance.

"I'm Mrs. Merino goin' tuh visit my son who is in jail," gave back the Kid in a feigned, husky old voice. "Come a-foggin' when the gun-lights start winkin' down thataway."

And he was gone into the night, shoulders hunched far over, wide bonnet hiding his stoney face from prying eyes. Four short guns made him look fat at the hips. Grimly the three watched him go, lips drawn down tightly. Then the heavy voice of Sheriff Hype Ringo sheered to them from the house. They crept close to a side window.

A devilish flame lit Butch's eyes as they saw the renegade lawman hovering threateningly over Ma Rockette. He was a big, fat-jowled man, swart as a breed cholo, ferret-eyed. A tarnished star was pinned prominently on his loud vest. Two tied-hard guns hung low on his slat-like thighs.

"Where'd yuh git this money?" he demanded unctuously. "Somethin' funny about this. You whined this mornin' yuh didn't have a dime! Where'd yuh git this?" He indicated the wad of currency gripped in his hairy black fist.

Ma Rockette's trim little chin lifted belligerently. "None of your business," she gave back, her dander up. "All you've got to do is . . . give me a receipt and . . . get out before you contaminate the place with your odor!"

Ringo's beefy lips curled in an avaricious, cunning snarl: "So ol' John *did* leave yuh a pile uh dinero hid out in this house like folks whisper, huh?"

"And yuh thought you could kick me out and tear the place down to find it, didn't you?" she husked furiously. "But you're wrong, Mister Hype Ringo! I'm penniless, and if it will make you rest easier, I'll tell you who gave me the money!"

Butch nudged Sundance and grinned. Then the hair was crawling along the back of his neck as the old lady blurted proudly: "Friends gave it to me! Good friends. . . . Butch Cassidy and his boys! They had dinner with me tonight!"

Ringo straightened as if knifed in the back. His eyes shuttled swiftly about the room, right hand dropping to his gun-heel. "Butch Cassidy?" he croaked with sudden fear. "Are you sure uh that?"

"Perfectly," Ma Rockette flung at him. "Their descriptions are plain on your poster at the stage depot. But compared with you, Hype Ringo, they are honest men! Fine lads! I'm proud to call them friends! Now, sign this receipt and get out!"

She waved a piece of paper in his face, then slammed it down on the table. A slow, evil grin built up on his swart face. He shoved the currency into his pocket. "Some other time, ol' lady," he croaked heartlessly. "This's stolen money! You move outa here in the mornin'!" And he strutted away, slamming the door as he went out. Ma Rockette simply wilted down into a chair. The cruelster's laugh floated back.

"Cocky rooster, ain't he?" Butch ground out. "He's due tuh be separated from his feathers!"

"Pick 'im clean," drawled the Tall Texan.

"An' let his bones hang an' rattle!" echoed Sundance. "Frolic's begun!"

Like cougars charging down a game trail, they loped through the gloom, reaching the front corner of the house just as Hype Ringo hit the boardwalk heavily. Butch's gun leaped into his hand. The swart face of the lawdog turned to chalk color as the longriders surged up in front of him. He skidded to an abrupt halt, recognized them and screamed shrilly: "Butch Cassidy! He's come! Get set tuh gun 'em down, men!"

His hands shot skyward. The echoes of his voice rolled through the silence of the town to be picked up and flung back and forth from one shell-like clapboard to the other. Heads jerked up as the staked out renegade deputies basking in the reflected glory of a heartless leader rushed with palmed guns to doors and windows.

"Gimme that dinero, Ringo!" Cassidy cracked out, his gun-muzzle deep in the lawman's flabby belly. "Payoff time in Painted Rock!"

"I got no money!" Ringo croaked, suddenly quaking in his boots.

"No?" Butch countered. "Hear tell yore tax collectin' is plumb profitable. We're thinkin' uh swappin' places with yuh!"

His left hand dove into Ringo's pocket, came out full of currency. "Nine hundred even, I reckon," he grunted, and cleaned his pockets, inside and out. His wallet bulged. "Neat little nest aigg, lawdog. You won't be needin' it no more. Nice trick yuh pulled on our kindly friend, Ma Rockette, wasn't it? Now let's see how fast them pump handles uh yore's can carry yuh with lead proddin' yore tailbone! Git!"

"You mean. . . ." husked Ringo stammeringly.

"I'm givin' yuh a chance yuh wouldn't even give a nice ol' lady like her . . . an' the Merino!" the giant spat. "Yo're takin' the *laya de fuego*. Bein' a tinstar uh questionable authority, yuh oughta know that is. Yuh go yore guns. Shuck 'em an' run!"

THREE hard faces creased with grim humor as the lawman took to his heels in panic. He jerked his guns as he went, flung two quick shots over his shoulder. The slugs whistled impotently above the longriders. Then their guns were erupting. Three pencils of blue flame leaped at Ringo, making the splinters fly at his fastmoving heels. Like a scared rabbit he spun, dove headlong through the swing doors of the Whistling Skull Saloon.

"Yella as a Kansas sunflower," scourged Sundance. "We shoulda downed 'im."

Cassidy chuckled frigidly. "His mark's chalked up," he clipped, pulling them back into the gloom pools. "We'll rub it out in time. He done jest what I wanted 'im tuh do. Now they'll be watchin' fer us here. That'll keep their attention offen the jailhouse. Let's look at the papers I took offen 'im."

Two heads converged with his as he spread out the first of the sheaf of letters in a triangle of light coming from the Rockette house. It was addressed to Sheriff Jim Bengold of Big Horn and signed by Governor Gardner relieving Bengold of his badge and ordering Ringo to succeed him. An oath burst from Butch's lips.

"It's a forgery!" he ground out. "I'd know Gardner's signature anywhere. It's on the pardon they gimme when I left Sundance Prison! Hype Ringo's a fake lawdog shore as hell! Pulled this stunt on ol' Chris Hildreth here an' this letter proves he was gonna do the same on Bengold iffen he had tuh leave here plumb sudden!" He surged up, stuffed the papers into a pocket. "End uh the line fer tinstar Ringo! Scatter an' meet me at the jailhouse. The Kid an' Merino'll be needin' us pronto now!"

They faded into the darkness in separate directions and with measured steps picked their way through the shadows to converge on the little jail near the far end of the street.

Silence gripped the town again, gushed over now that the gun echoes were stilled. Down at the jailhouse a sullen-faced deputy reached into the cell where the Merino lay on a dirty bunk, and tapped a little, back-bent old lady on the shoulder.

"Time's up, lady!" he gruffed. "I'll ketch hell fer lettin' yuh in if I'm caught. C'mon!"

Only a man with the heart of a stone could have denied a pleading mother a last visit with her noose-doomed son. There might have been a soft spot in this tin starred disciple of Hype Ringo, but it did him no good now. Mother Merino suddenly straightened, brushed the wide-brimmed bonnet from her head. Straw colored hair bristled as Kid Curry whirled. "Com in' an' at yuh!" he clipped, and triggered twin guns.

The jailhouse shuddered to the concussions. Pale as death from his confinement and loss of blood, the Merino leaped from the bunk as the deputy writhed down, his death cry mingling with the rocking gunsounds. "End uh the line, Kid!" he yelled in a thin voice. "All out!"

The rapid thud of running feet beat at them from the front office. "Think yuh can make it, ol' son?" Kid Curry clipped.

"Shucks!" Merino cackled, leaping through the open door of the cell, guns palmed, hammers eared back for business. "I been foolin' the lawdogs fer a week makin' 'em think I couldn't stand! I'd be cold fruit hangin' from a cottonwood now if they'd found out. I knowed yuh'd come. Here they . . ."

The two running deputies heeled

around a corner, saw them in the corridor and skidded to a stop. They started to trigger. Four short guns roared flatly almost in their faces. "Takin' yore taw, yuh gut-shootin', belly-crawlin' sons!" Curry hooted, acrid powder-smoke stinging his lungs.

The guns of the lawdogs erupted impotently into the ceiling. Like puppets on a string they tipped and swayed, then fell in a grotesque heap, one on top of the other. Outside an eerie cry lifted . . . the quavering hoot of an owl. Kid Curry grinned knowingly, shucked Ma Rockette's hampering wrapper and hustled the Merino forward.

Thin pencils of blue flame leaped at them as they emerged through the jail portal. The town shuddered to the cracking of caps. From the Whistling Skull a dozen or more guns were hurling lead at the Wild Bunch concealed in the shadows beside the jailhouse. Tethered horses bucked and squealed in fright at the tie-racks, contributing to the sudden clamor.

Braving death, Butch heeled forward, slugs whining about him, scuffing up splinters from the walk, slapping dully into the wall of the building. The Merino faltered from a sudden spasm of weakness. Like a babe the tawny-haired giant scooped him into his arms, ran with him out of danger. Curry matched his strides, guns fairly squirting lead toward the Whistling Skull.

The Merino squirmed sheepishly from Cassidy's crushing arms as they hit the shadows. "You'll be slappin' diapers on me next, Butch!" he grinned. "But thanks an' such. I'm feelin' swell an' too tough tuh kill."

"Whang leather an' steel, huh?" purred the giant. "I mighta knowed. Well, Ringo dishes it out. Now le's see iffen he can take it . . ." And he triggered at a face appearing suddenly in the shattered window of the Whistling Skull. Other vague forms lurked there. They jerked back as the tunnelled lawdog's death cry floated on the gunsmoke.

NOW all five of the Wild Bunch were in action. For a moment they poured thundering hell into the saloon. Wherever a face, a leg, a hunched shoulder appeared, a singling slug found rest. Begrimed with powdersmoke, acrid fumes biting their lungs, they surged up at Butch's signal. Then they were fanning out and heeling down and across the street toward the Whistling Skull. There guns erupted ominously. Little eddies of dust swirled up from their clothing as lawdog bullets snicked through. But no blood had yet been drawn.

Against that awful, deadly advance of the Wild Bunch, Hype Ringo's hirelings lost their nerve. With it their accuracy. Seven of their crowd already lay dead in their own blood puddles on the grimy floor. Death held high carnival in the Whistling Skull Saloon. But there was a $5000 bounty on the heads of the five stalwarts. Hype Ringo cursed his men to stand and fight.

Suddenly he saw Butch throw up his hand in signal. Then the Hole-In-The-Wall bunch was charging pell-mell for the batwing doors. Their recklessness, utter disregard for death, congealed lawdog blood to icy shivers.

"Trigger 'em as they come slattin' through, gunnies!" Ringo croaked, and leaped back to the bar, guns ready. "Give it to 'em! We're collectin' bounty!"

The swing doors batted open. Butch Cassidy, a gun bucking in either hand, sprang inside, crouched. His four stalwarts flanked him. The Merino forgot his weakness in the excitement of battle, remembered only his hate. Blood oozed from his cracked open wounds, stained his faded shirt where his suspenders crossed. But he had no knowledge of it. His twin guns sang boothill songs, harmonizing with the others. Through dense, acrid smoke, he saw a bewhiskered lawdog tip his gun at Curry, and beat him to the shot.

The tinstar writhed down as if his legs turned to rubber. Others tipped, spun and fell before the awful avalanche of Wild Bunch lead. Then the balance turned in panic to flee to the rear door. Their quivering bodies clogged the portal.

A vile curse dribbled from Ringo's snarling lips. His smoking guns went on Butch. One roared, the other clicked. Cassidy swayed from the impact of the slug smacking him numbingly in the shoulder. Then he was triggering his hate for the unlicensed lawdog who could rob helpless old ladies of their homes and shoot Wild Bunch friends in the back.

"Yo're jest a false alarm, Ringo," the swaying giant roared, and his guns rocked as one. Twin holes appeared magically in the lawdog's forehead, one over each eye. A look of amazement crossed his swart face. All color drained from him. The world seemed to grow abruptly still now. For what seemed ages he stood beside the bar. His mouth dropped open as if to say something. His eyes rolled until they looked like pigeon eggs, satin-white. Red trickles of blood oozed from those awesome holes, dropped like ruby beads from his bushy brows. He jerked and twitched and tried to lift his guns. But it was too much for him. Fascinated, the Wild Bunch watched death stalk him. He sagged down over the filthy rail to quiver an instant and lay still.

It was then that the Merino felt his weakness. It came over him in a dark wave. Sharp, stabbing pains shot up his back to hammer sledge-like blows at the base of his brain. His eyes glazed over. The starch left his body like dry sand from a split sack. The thud of his falling brought the Bunch spinning toward him.

"Too much fer 'im," Butch clipped, unmindful of his own wounds as he knelt down and clawed the guns from the youngster's fists. "You, Ben, take this down tuh Miz Rockette with our compliments," he handed the Tall Texan a wad of currency from Ringo's wallet and tossed the leather fold aside. "It's Wild Bunch tax on unlicensed lawdogs! It'll help her a heap tuh git goin' again. Meet yuh on the way out."

From behind drawn blinds, lawdog-bitten citizens watched the cavalcade gig gingerly down the street, a tawny-haired giant cuddling close to him a much smaller man with the ease and tenderness of a mother nursing her babe.

Holding a guttering lamp, Ma Rockette stood on the front porch of the old honeymoon house. Her pale eyes swam with tears of gratitude. She waved as the cavalcade roared past. Four renegade throats constricted. A chorus of quavering owlhoots lifted, trembled over the town in salute. She didn't shiver now when a wise-faced bird warbled answer from the gloom-cloaked gables.

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SMASHING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL OF AN EXILED SHERIFF'S LONE-HAND PLAY AGAINST THE GUN WRAITHS OF HIS OWLHOOT PAST!

He took sure aim with his six-gun and squeezed the trigger

I

BLAZE HEFFLIN was no coward. But there are limits to the things a man can stand. As far back as Las Vegas, New Mexico, eighteen days ago, Blaze had sighted the man on the bay who dogged his backtrail.

At first Blaze hadn't been sure that the stranger was following him. To make certain he had swung a hundred miles to the north, across the Sangre de Cristo range and up to Fort Taos. He waited in Taos two days and on the second day had his second look at the same man.

Blaze was fairly fast with his guns but his critical inspection of this stranger made him hesitate in taking his chances in an open shoot-out. The stranger was tall and lean and even in his walk had a certain economy of motion that warned Blaze of what he could expect.

At the feed-barn, the oldster who saddled the chestnut as Blaze was leaving, wiped out the last small doubt.

"Stranger here lookin' for you a while back," the oldster announced only when Blaze had climbed into the saddle. "He was askin' for a red-headed gent forkin' a chestnut horse. It weren't none o' my business so I told him I'd never set eyes on you. That all right?"

Blaze fished into his pocket and flipped down a silver dollar. "Stick to your story," he said as he rode away. Blaze's hair was a fiery red and anyone who had

Long Riding Lawman

by PETER DAWSON

Author of "Owlhoot Outcast," etc.

Eight years of fearless, honorable law-rodding couldn't balance those two nights when bitter injustice drove Sheriff John Branch onto the owlhoot!

ever seen the chestnut would never mistake the animal for another.

Halfway the length of Taos Canyon, coming down off the high mesa and into the valley of the Rio Grande, Blaze decided to get this over with. He climbed high into the cover of the boulders flanking the steep trail and waited, his Winchester within easy reach and his chestnut horse staked out a safe quarter mile away. He was a dead shot with a rifle and wasn't particular about his target being either a man's chest or back.

He waited there the remainder of that day, with no sign of the stranger. Dusk fanned alive a fear within him and he ran to his horse and went up into the saddle and by noon of the next day, coming into Santa Fe, he and the animal were both exhausted. In Santa Fe he caught two hours sleep, traded the chestnut for a black gelding, and rode on.

EACH evening he'd climb a high place and scan his back trail for a good hour before making camp. After six days

his fears gradually left him and he no longer hurried. Yesterday at sundown, crossing a high pass through the Wigwams, he had taken his last long look back across the stretch of country he'd covered that day. The only rider he sighted was a man mounted on a roan leisurely crossing an open pasture in the timber a mile below. The road didn't interest him. Last night he had slept well.

This morning, at sun-up, he'd had his far look at Coyote Wells with a feeling of keen relief. Deuce Morgan would still be in Coyote Wells. Deuce always had a thing or two that could be done by a man of Blaze's capabilities.

Now, trotting his black down the town's single dusty street, he took a little satisfaction in the knowledge that in this south country the law wouldn't be anxious to spot a man with greying red hair and a slight droop to the lid of his right eye. Blaze Hefflin was a name, but not a name to travel this far.

He picked out Deuce Morgan's glaring red-painted sign, *Lucky Girl Saloon* along the length of wooden awning that fronted the stores at the street's center, and he swung the black in at the hitch-rail in front of the place. Getting down out of the saddle he faced the opposite side of the street a moment. Across there bright sunlight was reflected glaringly from a polished bit of metal to catch his eye.

Faintly curious, Blaze looked closer and saw that the reflection came from a five-pointed sheriff's star pinned on the vest of a man leaning idly against an awning post. And, since law men always interested him, Blaze looked closely at this one.

His eyes narrowed a trifle and he breathed ,"Hell, I'm seein' things!"

The sheriff had the look of a man crowding fifty, with a lean, hawkish face and a grey moustache. He wore a faded and soiled grey stetson and stood with thumbs hooked in the sag of his single shell-belt. His stance, his sharp features, and the Bull Durham tag hanging out of his levi pocket were signs that sharpened Blaze Hefflin's scrutiny.

"It *is* him!" he muttered, half aloud. A slow smile shaped its twisted line on his face. "I wonder if Deuce knows? If he don't," he shrugged as his words trailed off.

He turned quickly, ducked under the tie-rail, and went in at the saloon doors, walking fast and with a pronounced limp he momentarily forgot to hide.

And Sheriff John Branch, across the street, happened to look across toward the *Lucky Girl* at that moment and catch a last glimpse of Blaze before he disappeared. That one glance was enough to bring the law man out of his slouch against the awning post.

Branch's brown eyes became narrow-lidded. "A brick top and a limp!" he said, half aloud. "It couldn't pass me!" Yet as he uttered the words he knew that it could be Blaze Hefflin, that it could be no one else.

He stepped down off the walk and let his hand fall to the weapon at his thigh and made certain that it lifted easily from the holster before he started across the street toward the saloon. Given a little more time he'd have done several things; he'd have gone back to his office and made out his will, for one, since it was a sure bet that Blaze hadn't lost his old skill with a six-gun. Now there was no time.

Stepping up onto the walk in front of the *Lucky Girl,* Branch heard a light quick step sound against the planks, and a moment later felt a touch on his arm.

It was Ellen, his daughter, who stood at his elbow smiling up at him. One look at him and her oval face sobered instantly. "Dad, aren't you feeling well?"

"Not so good," he told her, in momentary confusion. "Butch has a new Chink cook and I ate a piece of his pie after breakfast. Indigestion."

"You go right on home and take some baking soda," the girl said, a look of relief wiping away her frown and turning her clean-cut face pretty once more. She abruptly held out a hand. "That dress material came in on the stage an hour ago. I need three dollars."

"Why can't you women wear dollar pants like us?" Branch chided her as he reached for his wallet and took out the money. A moment ago, when Ellen's smooth features had shaped that look of concern, she'd had her mother's look. It was a hard memory to have brought up just now.

"Remember the baking soda, Dad." The girl took the money and went on down the street.

Branch stood there a moment, watch-

ing his daughter's swinging stride, admiring her tall graceful figure. Her smooth-combed tawny hair caught the sunlight and took on a golden sheen he knew he'd be remembering when he faced Blaze Hefflin a minute or two from now.

"Sheriff."

Branch swung his glance out to the hitch-rail in the direction of the voice. A stranger sat the saddle of a roan horse alongside the black gelding Blaze had ridden in a moment ago. The stranger was tall and his shirt and levis were dust-powdered and he had the look of having come a long way. He wore two guns.

"Sheriff, did you see the gent that rode this black in a few minutes ago?"

Branch hadn't seen Blaze come in, didn't know who owned the black. "No."

"Was he a red head?" the stranger queried insistently.

Branch's glance narrowed. He queried sharply. "What would you be wantin' of a man with red hair?"

The stranger smiled, came down out of the saddle and onto the walk. "Stick around and watch the fun," he said as he passed the law man and pushed open the saloon's swing doors.

"Hold on," Branch called. But by that time the stranger was out of sight.

Branch let his hand reach for the handle of his six-gun as he followed. He was halfway through the doors when it happened.

At the far end of the bar Blaze Hefflin stood talking with Deuce Morgan, whose outfit this morning was a fawn-colored cutaway coat, trousers to match, expensive-looking polished boots. The sheriff looked back at them just as Blaze glanced quickly up front, pushed out from the bar and stabbed both hands toward his holsters. Deuce Morgan lunged quickly aside. Branch's glance darted to the far side of the doors. The stranger was standing there, spraddle-legged, his right hand already moving in one swift flow of motion to palm up the weapon at his thigh. Branch was too bewildered to move or cry out.

The stranger's weapon blurred upward, froze in line and blasted out a foot-long stab of powder-flame. Blaze Hefflin's up-swinging arm hesitated as his body jerked. Then his weapon rose into line and John Branch saw clearly the frantic motion his thumb made to pull back the weapon's hammer.

Suddenly a second shot from the stranger's Colt's thundered across the room. Blaze staggered backward hard against the bar, his .45 fell and his hand clawed his chest. Then, slowly, Blaze bent at the waist and fell forward, hitting the sawdust floor with a force that skidded him along the planks a half foot.

When Deuce Morgan's right hand went in under his coat-lapel toward his shoulder-holster, the sheriff drew his .45 and called sharply, "Easy, Deuce, easy!"

Deuce's hand came down, empty. Three men moved out from a poker-table at the rear of the room, two more stepped the length of the bar to look down as Deuce Morgan knelt beside Blaze Hefflin. The sheriff dropped his six-gun back into its holster.

"Dead," the saloon-owner said. He glanced across at the stranger, whose smoking gun was still levelled rock-steady in his hand. "Arrest him, Sheriff. This was murder."

"You're forgettin, that I saw it, Deuce," Branch said, a wave of relief hitting him. "Your dead friend went for his iron first. It was self-defense."

"And why would this gent make a play against a stranger?" Deuce asked, nodding down at the dead man.

"Ask the stranger, "Branch answered.

The stranger spoke for the first time. "Twenty-eight days ago he murdered a man in Cheyenne, Wyoming. I took out after him two days later. He's kicked his dust in my face all the way down here."

DEUCE MORGAN laughed mirthlessly. "A hell of a likely story! You've cut down a friend of mine, Stranger. I'm askin' you to prove he ever committed murder."

John Branch could have proved murder on Blaze Hefflin. But for the last twenty years he'd tried to forget that part of his past. He had no wish to make it public now. With Blaze Hefflin's death, that past would be buried forever.

"You can prove it by writin' the sheriff at Cheyenne," the stranger drawled. "The man this red-head shot in the back was my father. He died in a dark alley, on a Saturday night,

carryin' home a money-bag with less than a hundred dollars in it. It was his day's takin's from his harness shop. Your friend took the money."

John Branch had only half listened to these details. He was thinking of something else, and now he asked Morgan, "What was your business with this hard-case, Deuce? I've got an idea I may find his picture on a reward-dodger." The law man knew he was stating a fact. Blaze Hefflin had been wanted off and on for years, for rustling, murder, arson, robbery.

"Maybe you'd like to know what we were talkin' about when you came in, Sheriff," Morgan said, suavely.

John Branch's peace of mind left him in a split-second. "Maybe I would," he answered.

"Shall I tell it here or will you come into my back office?"

Branch felt the color rise to his face. "I'll come to your office," he said. Then, in answer to the mildly surprised and questioning stares of the onlookers, he said sharply, "The rest of you carry this jasper across to Harry Lodge's. Have Harry nail up a box and bury him. I'll pay the bill."

He forgot about the stranger until he had closed the door of Deuce Morgan's office. Morgan took the chair behind his walnut desk, opened a box of cigars and held them out to the law man. "Smoke?"

"You know damn well I don't smoke your cigars, Deuce," Branch said, suddenly impatient to get this over with. "Spill what you've got on your mind."

Morgan smiled, his blunt square countenance deceivingly placid. He bit off the end of a cigar, felt at his vest pockets for a match; not finding any, he pulled open a drawer of his desk in a casual gesture. His hand came out holding a pearl-handled Colt's .38. His left hand whipped the cigar from his mouth and threw it into the waste-basket.

With his weapon lined at the law man's chest, he drawled, "Blaze had a thing or two to say out there before he cashed in. There wasn't much but it was enough."

John Branch's legs went weak under him. He said lifelessly, "Never mind the gun, Deuce," and stepped back to let himself down into a leather-covered chair at the wall facing the saloon-owner.

Morgan laid the weapon within easy reach on his desk. "John, you and I haven't been seein' things quite the same way for years. For six years, in fact, ever since I came to this country and set up in business."

"The only thing I ever had against you was the way you took after Ellen," Branch said. "She's not your kind."

"We'll forget that for the moment," Deuce said, his mirthless grin putting an obvious meaning behind his words. "We'll talk about the gamblin'. You closed up my back room six months ago. I'm losin' money since you put through that ordinance to outlaw card games in this town. I want that ordinance voted down at the next meetin' of the Town Council."

"You can't get away with that!" the law man flared, leaning forward in his chair.

"Can't I?" Deuce breathed. "What about that two hundred head of Broad Arrow horses you and Blaze sold across the Canadian border twenty years ago?"

THERE wasn't any argument left in John Branch. His past had caught up with him. Twenty years ago, unjustly accused of having framed a crooked card game by a forked sheriff, Branch had for two nights turned outlaw. With Blaze Hefflin and three other men who hated the Broad Arrow outfit that owned that Montana law man, John Branch had succeeded in driving away the entire Broad Arrow remuda and selling it to friends of Blaze's across the Border. Branch hadn't even taken his share of the money they were paid for the horses. Knowing that Montana law would suspect him, he had come down here into Arizona. For twenty years he'd lived an honest life, made an honest name. For eight years he'd served as Coyote Wells' sheriff.

"What about those stolen horses?" Deuce repeated his question.

"I reckon I could go back and square that."

"And come back here again? With these people knowin' they have a horse-thief for a sheriff?"

Branch's face had paled, his brown eyes hard as flint. "Deuce, I'll kill you for that!"

Deuce Morgan smiled, picked up his gun once more. "In an hour I'll have written a statement and put it in an

envelope in the vault at the bank, Sheriff. In case anything happens to me I'll tell Rex Holden to open that envelope."

John Branch thought that over for a moment. His look changed, not to that of a beaten man but one held powerless by circumstances. "You win, Deuce. I'll have the gamblin' ordinance changed at the Council meetin, tomorrow." He got up out of his chair.

"Play along with me and I'll treat you right," Deuce said genially. "In a few days I'll have a few more ideas."

Branch went out the door, the picture of Deuce Morgan's mocking smile clearly imprinted in his mind. He walked down the street and to his office at the jail. He was closing the door behind him before he saw the two people in the room.

Rex Holden, president of the Cowman's Bank and Trust Company was in the chair at the law man's desk. The stranger was seated on the broad ledge of the thick adobe wall at the window. The stranger wore a five-pointed star with "Deputy Sheriff" printed boldly across the center-plate. John Branch wasn't sure that he was seeing right.

Holden laughed, catching the momentary bewildered look on Branch's face.

"Meet your new deputy, John," he said. "Calls himself Ed Sims. Hails all the way from Cheyenne."

Branch finally managed to get out, "Rex, you've gone loco!"

Holden shook his head. "No such thing, John. This mornin' I made Bill Edge the loan on that piece of land he's had his eye on. He was goin' to come around and hand in his badge right afterward but agreed to wait until we found you a new deputy. I got Charley Riley and Sid Hockins together and we was figurin' who'd make you a good man when those two shots cut loose over at the saloon." He turned to the stranger to say, "You tell him the rest, Sims."

Ed Sims looked a little uncomfortable at the expression of sudden anger that had come to the sheriff's grizzled countenance. "I needed a job, Sheriff. They offered me one."

"John, he'll make the finest deputy Coyote Wells ever had," Rex Holden said. "They say he's the fastest thing with a gun ever to hit the town. He's honest or my eyesight's goin' back on me. With Bill Edge quittin' you this afternoon you'll need a new man. Can you think of a better one?"

The involuntary thought that crossed John Branch's mind was to wonder whether or not Deuce Morgan could have thought of a better man, perhaps one of his friends. But he put down that thought along with the anger he'd felt at Rex Holden's officious way of choosing a deputy for him. If he was to have the gambling ordinance revoked, he'd have to humor Rex Holden along with the rest of the Council members.

"Suits me," he said, finally. An inner thought shaped a smile on his thin face as he looked at his new deputy. "Your luck must run high, Sims. You missed gettin' arrested a half hour ago by no more than the thickness of a straightedge. Now you turn up wearin' a law badge. Maybe you'll be a good man to have around."

II

THE Council meeting was set for four the next afternoon. Fifteen minutes short of the hour John Branch came back to his office to give Ed Sims a few last instructions about meeting the stage that would arrive at four-thirty, and guarding the mail while it was being carried down to the postoffice.

The office door was standing open. The law man was about to enter when he heard his daughter's voice from inside. "But there's no excuse for killing a man in cold blood!" Ellen was angry. Branch could tell that by her low-toned, evenly spaced words. "Regardless of what he'd done, it was no place for you to take the law in your hands. That's the way killers get their start."

"I'd do it again," came Ed Sims' drawling words in answer. "You're wrong about this, Miss. Blaze Hefflin could have hired a lawyer and saved his neck. He was a friend of this Deuce Morgan's. Morgan would have bought him . . ."

"Don't tell me the law can be bought around Coyote Wells!" Ellen flared. "My father's honest. For eight years he's . . ."

John Branch stepped in through the door, growling, "Here, you two! What's all the talk?"

Ellen, standing at the back window, turned to face her father, brown eyes flashing in anger. "Dad, you wouldn't have chosen this man for deputy yourself! You've never hired a killer!"

Branch looked across at Ed Sims, who was seated on a corner of the desk. Ed's tanned face was darkened with a flush of embarrassment. It was obvious that an inner courtesy was the only thing that checked the words that would have matched the hardness of his grey eyes. Branch recognized this gentlemanly quality immediately and liked the man for it.

"Ellen, you're meddlin'." he said. "Ed did the same as any red-blooded man would have done. Let someone murder me and nine chances to ten you'd take out after him with a gun. Now you get on out of here and be thankin' your stars we're lucky enough to get Ed to wear a badge. With the pay he's drawin', it's a wonder he'd take the job."

The girl's glance changed to one of bewilderment. Time and again she and her father had discussed this thing—the needlessness of relying on guns when the law could be depended on—and now, to realize that her father was against her hit her as hard as a blow in the face.

Branch caught her look and hastily put in: "There's times when nothin' but a gun will answer to a wrong, Sis."

Pride, and the wish not to be humbled before this comparative stranger, took its hold on Ellen Branch. She came across to the door with a firm step, head held high, saying, "Dad, if I didn't know you better, I'd say you'd been drinking."

When the sounds of her steps had faded out down the walk, Branch chuckled a little nervously, eyeing his deputy. "She must like you," he said. "It isn't often anyone gets her riled that way."

But Ed Sims was strangely sober. "What she said about you choosin' your own deputy, Sheriff . . . I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I'd better look for another job."

John Branch, for reasons of his own, felt more than a slender obligation toward this man. "Given the chance, I'd have asked you to wear the badge myself, Ed. Hell, we need a man like you here!" A sudden impulse made him add, "The Council meets in ten minutes. Supposin' you come along and listen. There's times when you'll have to go in my place and you might as well get to know the ropes."

This show of confidence partly erased the feeling Ellen Branch's words had brought up in Ed Sims. At the bank, ten minutes later, Rex Holden and Sid Hockens and Charley Riley welcomed the new deputy in the way John Branch had thought they would; they were old-timers and it was their instinct to respect a wilful man who was fast with a gun and knew when to use one.

BRANCH had spent a good part of the day thinking about the gambling ordinance, and how he would bring the discussion around to it. But in less than five minutes Rex Holden said abruptly, "I should have called this thing off. That bid of Freemont's on diggin' the new well is the only thing I wanted to see you about, and Freemont hasn't sent it in yet. So the meetin's adjourned."

"Hold on a minute," Branch said hurriedly. It was a poor way to work around to the business he had in mind; but he was thinking of Blaze Hefflin and the things Blaze had told Deuce, and of what the saloon-owner might do if he had to wait two more weeks to open his roulette, faro, crap, and chuck-a-luck layouts.

He cleared his throat as the others hesitated. "Rex, I've been thinkin' about that gamblin' ordinance we put through last spring. It's costin' this town money."

Rex Holden frowned. "I don't get it, John."

"We're losin' business," Branch said. "Pinnacle is only twenty miles away and every Saturday night there's at least fifty Coyote Wells men over there spendin' their pay in those saloons. That's money that ought to stay in our town."

"But we decided it was better to lose a little than to have open gamblin' bring in the undesirables, John. I thought that was your idea."

"It was. But a man has a right to change his mind. Now that I've got my new deputy, I think the two of us can keep order if we open the town to gamblin'. I'm willin' to give it a try."

Sid Hockins smiled and said: "I'd like to see it. Hell, in the old days the bunch of us had more fun in a saloon Saturday nights than we do now sittin' at home. The Ladies Aid's gettin' too strong a hold on us."

Holden leaned forward in his chair. "John, you're serious about this? You want to see us throw this town wide open?"

"Why not?" the law man shrugged. "Deuce Morgan will make a good citizen if we treat him right. He spends what money he makes here. He'll spend more if he makes more. It's good business."

"In another month all the big outfits will be layin' off their crews after round-up," Holden said. "I'll agree it might bring us business but there'll be trouble, too."

Ed Siims spoke for the first time. "It's none of my affair," he said, mildly. "But I've seen it work both ways in the town where I was raised. Gambin' finally went out for good when a banker up there married a percentage girl." . . . Hockins and Riley looked at Holden and had a good laugh . . . "Well, it isn't my place to say. But that's how it was."

John Branch had gone a little red in the face. Those brief words of Ed Sims' had turned this from seriousness to a joke.

Holden said, "It may not be me that marries the percentage girl. But Sims has given us a fair idea of what happens when the lid's off. Let's forget gamblin' and let Pinnacle have all that business it wants."

That broke up the meeting. No one took the things the sheriff had said too seriously; no one lost any of the respect they held for him. But Ed Sims' timely words had clinched the decisions and for the time being it would make the sheriff appear ridiculous to press his point.

Branch left the room shortly afterward, when Sid Hockins started talking to Ed Sims, asking after two or three friends he had in Cheyenne. The sheriff went down the street directly to the *Lucky Girl* wanted to be the first to tell Deuce Morgan of his temporary failure.

Ed Sims was wishing he hadn't opened his mouth, thinking that he'd shown his gratitude for getting his job in a poor way. He left Sid Hockins as soon as he could, wanting to see the sheriff and explain that he had meant what he said the way it sounded. He came out onto the street in time to see Branch turn in at the *Lucky Girl.* Evidently the sheriff was feeling the need of a drink. Sims abruptly decided to go into the saloon after the law man.

THE bar-room was nearly empty. Poker hadn't been outlawed along with other gambling games, and now a lone man occupied one of the four tables, playing out a hand of solitaire. Two others stood at the bar and eyed Ed Sims respectfully as he came across the room. They, and every other man in town, had heard of the fight in here yesterday.

"Anyone seen the sheriff?" Ed asked.

The bartender nodded toward a door at the rear of the room. "He's back with the boss."

Ed decided to wait. He asked for whiskey and took it to the back end of the bar and sat on a stool back there, not wishing to have to answer the questions he knew the pair up front would be asking him.

He had barely let his weight down onto the stool when he heard John Branch's voice sound out of Morgan's office. "Deuce, I did my best. It wasn't good enough. You'll have to wait until the next meetin'."

Ed turned and looked toward the door. It stood slightly ajar. Then he heard Deuce Morgan say, "You're runnin' a sandy on me, Branch! All right, you asked for it! By tomorrow every man in town will know what Blaze Hefflin told me."

Branch's voice came hard and strained: "It'll be your word against mine, Deuce. You can't make it stick even if it is the truth."

"Can't I?" Morgan said. "Wait until you see how I'll make it stick.' There was a tense, long-drawn silence; then Morgan said: "Read this, Branch?"

A shorter silence this time. At length, the sheriff's words sounded hard and clear: "Deuce, I said once before I'd kill you. That still goes."

"And this mornin' I took that envelope over to Rex Holden. It's in his office safe. Go ahead, friend Branch. If you want a charge of murder along with this other it suits me." There was the scrape of a chair inside the office. "I'm sendin' this wire off right now."

Ed Sims moved down from the end of the bar as quickly as he could without attracting the attention of the trio further along the counter. They were busy talking and obviously hadn't heard what was going on in Morgan's office.

Ed put his elbows on the bar midway its length and turned in time to see the

door to the back room open. Deuce Morgan's square frame stood outlined in it. His glance travelled the length of the room, finally came back to settle on Ed Sims.

A tight smile came to the saloon-owner's blunt visage. He spoke back over his shoulder. "Your deputy's out front, Branch. He'd be a good man to run this errand." Then, more loudly, he called: "Sims, I'd like to see you a minute."

Ed sauntered on back until he stood within arm-reach of Deuce Morgan. He tried to mask the feeling of loathing that came up within him at sight of Morgan's calm arrogance.

Morgan stepped aside and jerked a thumb toward the inside of his office. "Branch is in there. He wants you to take this telegram down to the stage and have the driver leave it at the way-station beyond Pinnacle." Morgan held an envelope in his other hand, and now he turned and said to the sheriff, "Isn't that right, John?"

Ed took half a step further toward the door, so that he could look into the office and see John Branch standing in front of the desk. The law man's face was pale, unhealthy-looking beneath its tan. But his words were firm as he said, "That's right, Ed."

Morgan reached into a trouser-pocket and handed Ed a silver dollar along with the envelope. "You'll have to hurry," he said, his face holding that same mirthless smile. "I heard the stage come in five minutes ago."

"I'm to give this to the driver and tell him to leave it at the way-station beyond Pinnacle," Ed said. Getting Morgan's answering nod, he turned and walked out the swing doors up front as casually as he could.

ON the way up the street his thoughts were a disordered jumble as he groped helplessly for an explantion to the things he'd overheard. John Branch had the look of being an honest man; back there in the office he'd had the look of being a condemned man. Strangely enough, Ed Sims' thoughts turned to Ellen Branch, to the deep-rooted instincts within her that had made her protest the hiring of a man who had yesterday killed another. No father of a girl with such principles could be anything but honest.

Convinced of this, Ed Sims walked up the street to the stage-station, spent two minutes talking with the driver on the chance that Deuce Morgan would be watching from the saloon-doorway. Then, the envelope thrust in his hip-pocket, Ed headed for the feed-stable.

Inside the shelter of the barn's doorway he took out the envelope and ripped it open. Inside was a sheet of paper half covered with Deuce Morgan's unruly scrawl. It read:

SHERIFF, BLAINE COUNTY, CHINOOK, MONTANA. HAVE YOU INFORMATION ON A JOHN BRANCH AND A BLAZE HEFFLIN WANTED FOR THEFT OF BROAD ARROW REMUDA TWETY YEARS AGO? IS REWARD BEING OFFERED? WIRE COLLECT FULL PARTICULARS TO A. L. MORGAN, COYOTE WELLS, ARIZONA.

Ed read the message twice, gradually piecing together happenenings of the last two days that explained many things. He halfway understood Blaze Hefflin's part in this, and it occurred to him that Sheriff John Branch might possibly have been on his way into the saloon yesterday to meet Blaze when he himself arrived. He saw clearly the Sheriff's reasons for trying to get the gambling ordinance revoked at the Council meeting this afternoon. And he saw, too, that no one but an honest man could have the name John Branch had made in this country.

Before he burned Morgan's message and its envelope he made particular note of the address. Then, grinding the heel of his boot into the curling black ash of the charred paper on the floor of the feed-barn, he stepped out onto the street again and went to Branch's office.

The law man was seated in the chair behind his desk, staring vacantly at the opposite wall when Ed stepped into the room. The law man brought his attention back to the present with obvious effort, saw who it was, and queried lifelessly, "Did you see the driver before he left?"

Ed nodded.

Branch let a gusty sigh escape him, then laughed harshly. "Sims, don't ever run from a thing. Don't ever smear your name with something that'll come down off your back trail later on."

Ed tried to look surprised. "That's a

hard order for a man to fill. Things happen the wrong way sometimes."

Branch may have heard but gave no sign of it, for the next remark was along a different line. "I've never shot a man in cold blood up until now. What would you do if you knew you had to murder a man?"

"You know what I did do," Ed answered. "But in your place I might work it out differently. If you've got something on your mind maybe it'd help to talk about it. To me, I mean."

The law man smiled, an expression that lacked any hint of amusement. "Ed, you have a way of comin' at things square from the front. I'd give a lot to be in your boots, thirty years younger, no strings tied to anyone, hellin' for a good scrap. Maybe I'd buy into a good scrap tonight." Abruptly some inner thought made him clench his lips tightly together. He got up out of his chair, said, "Stick around until I've had supper," and went out the door.

Ed Sims didn't eat until late, after dark that night. He ate a light meal for a hungry man, mainly because he was in too much of a hurry to take the time over a lot of food. Ten minutes after he'd left Butch's lunch counter he was in the saddle, headed out the west trail that would take him to Pinnacle.

SHORTLY after midnight he was pounding at the door of the railroad way-station shack five miles above Pinnacle. When the racket his fist set up on the thin pine panel of the door didn't bring results, he drew one of his six-guns and used it. In another ten seconds the window alongside the door was raised and the blunt double-barreled snout of a shotgun was thrust out at him as a man's irritated sleepy voice growled: "Get the hell away from here!"

"Here's a telegram that has to go off tonight," Ed said, not moving off the doorstep even when the shotgun swung around to cover him.

"It'll go off at seven in the mornin'," the agent said. "I'm paid for a twelve hour day and damned . . ."

Ed suddenly stepped in close to hug the front wall, lunging down off the step and streaking a hand out toward the window. The gun swung its arc as tight as it could against the edge of the frame and blasted its double explosion out to rip away the night's stillness. The fanning hail of lead chopped to tatters the edge of Ed's right sleeve before his hands closed on the hot gun-barrels.

He threw all his weight into the abrupt wrench he gave the gun. He stumbled awkwardly and lost his balance as the agent suddenly let go his hold on the weapon. And in the brief interval it took Ed to get his legs under him the man inside stepped through the window, his short chunky shape a little ridiculous-looking for the bulge of his night-shirt above the trousers he'd pulled on.

He moved fast, coming in at Ed in a practiced fighter's crouch. He ignored the six-gun in Ed's hand and swung in a short choppy blow that Ed dodged and caught on his shoulder. Ed swung around with that blow, and the turn of his body put more weight behind the long swing of his left fist. It hit the agent's chin with such force that the man's jaw moved sideways a good two inches; it brought a rigidity to his legs so that they couldn't move to take up the slack of his body. He fell forward, in the way of a man hit hard and with senses shocked to paralysis.

Five minutes later, when the agent opened his eyes and stared up with a cold, hard anger brightening his glance, Ed showed his deputy's badge. "If you hadn't been so proddy you could have seen this and saved yourself a couple of teeth. I'm here on official business."

The agent sat up, wiping the blood from the back of his hand, running his tongue gingerly along his loosened teeth. Ed Sims was right; two of those front teeth were nearly falling out. The agent, a surly-tempered but nevertheless shrewd man, muttered, "I thought you was one of those Pinnacle drunks." He got stiffly to his feet and started toward the hut sitting alongside the twin ribbons of steel of the railroad, reaching to his back-pocket for his keys.

Inside, ten minutes later, he was tapping out the message Ed Sims handed him. It read:

SHERIFF, BLAINE COUNTY, CHINOOK, MONTANA. IS A JOHN BRANCH WANTED FOR STEALING HORSE FROM CHINOOK LIVERY STABLE LAST APRIL? ANSWER BRIEFLY COLLECT. A. L. MORGAN, COYOTE WELLS, ARIZONA.

Finished, the agent looked up at Ed, a hint of belligerence still in his glance. "You Morgan?"

"Albert Linlee Morgan," Ed said, giving the first names he could think of to fit the initials. His hand went into his pocket and he took out a five-dollar gold-piece. "Here's pay for your trouble of stoppin' the stage tomorrow mornin' and handin' the driver the answer to this wire."

The agent pocketed the money, managed a twisted smile. "No hard feelin's are there, Morgan?"

Ed grinned. "I should be askin' you that."

The agent sat there at his key until the sound of Ed's roan's earth-striking hooves had died out in the still night air. He knew Deuce Morgan well, well enough to remember his initials. And he knew, too, that Bill Edge was the only deputy John Branch had had for the last five years.

The thing that brought him out of his chair and sent him back to his shack was the memory of more than one time when Deuce Morgan's money had lined his pockets in payment for the knowledge of just such a thing as had happened tonight. A telegraph-operator is the holder of many confidences. Morgan's money had many times loosened this agent's tongue.

He dressed, put on his coat and went back to the lean-to to saddle his one horse. As he took the Coyote Wells trail he muttered, half aloud, "Maybe Deuce can pay for havin' these teeth fixed." The teeth were hurting now, and he was in an ugly temper. Each time he thought of the deputy who'd taken Deuce Morgan's name his scowl deepened. He wasn't a man who forgot easily.

III

DEUCE MORGAN was at the stage station at nine the next morning when the stage pulled in, a quarter hour late. The saloon-owner's black eyes were puffy from what a casual observer might have assumed was the morning-after effect of too much whiskey. It wasn't that; Morgan was no heavy drinker; last night he'd had only two hours sleep.

He sauntered to the edge of the walk as the stage-driver booted tight the brake. "Mornin', Henry. Anything for me?" Morgan glanced casually around, satisfied in seeing that half a dozen people had heard him. Sid Hockins was one of the half dozen.

"Telegram, Mr. Morgan," the driver called down. He leaned down to open the box under the seat and tossed down a yellow-enveloped telegram. "Scudder flagged me with it at the way-station above Pinnacle. Said it was urgent."

Morgan frowned, turned to Sid Hockins who stood just behind him, and said, "Sid, hang around a minute. This may be something that'll interest you."

He opened the telegram, read:

A. L. MORGAN, COYOTE WELLS, ARIZONA. JOHN BRANCH AND EDWARD SIMS BOTH WANTED FOR THEFT OF BROAD ARROW REMUDA TEN YEARS AGO. HOLD BOTH MEN FOR DELIVERY TO MY DEPUTY LEAVING THIS MORNING BY TRAIN. REWARD OF TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS WILL BE PAID DIRECT UPON DELIVERY OF PRISONERS. BERT WATERS, SHERIFF, BLAINE COUNTY, CHINOOK, MONTANA.

"Read this, Sid," Morgan said, handing across the telegram. But as Sid Hockins reached out a hand to take it, Morgan pulled it back again. "On second thought you'd better come along with me to Rex Holden's office. We'll all read it together."

Hockins, following Morgan up the walk, queried, "Something wrong?"

"Wait and see."

Holden was alone in his office. He wasn't overly glad to see Deuce Morgan, but his tone was civil enough as he said, "Howdy, Sid, Deuce. What's on your minds?"

In answer, Morgan stepped up to the desk and laid the opened telegram on it. Sid Hockins went around the desk to stand behind Holden and read over the banker's shoulder.

Rex Holden's face lost color as his eyes scanned the lines. He read the telegram twice, then looked up at Morgan and said, "This'll bear some explainin'."

"I hate it as badly as you do," Morgan said. "But yesterday when this new deputy, Sims, killed that man in my

place, I got suspicious."

"Why?"

"Because Blaze Hefflin was just telling me what he knew about John Branch and this Ed Sims. Tellin' me part of what that telegram tells. Hefflin had recognized Branch out on the street. It seems that Hefflin was in on that horse-stealin' ten years ago. He and Sims had travelled together off and on since, until lately the two of them had a run-in. He knew Sims was on his back-trail and unloaded what was on his mind to me when he saw Branch."

Sid Hockins' long face had gone cold sober. "Morgan, this is a tall story to make stick. I'd as soon believe this of Rex as I would of John Branch."

"That's what I thought until yesterday," Morgan said, suavely. "Until John Branch came to me with a proposition."

"What kind of a proposition?" Holden queried.

"To have the gamblin' ordinance revoked. Branch said he could swing it if I'd cut him in for a quarter of my takin's from the gamblin' parlor I'd open up."

HOCKIN'S eyes narrowed in sudden amazement and he breathed softly, "That checks with what we know. Branch tried to get us to rule out that ordinance yesterday at the Council meetin'. Only it didn't go through."

Morgan smiled crookedly. "It was because it didn't go through that I sent a wire to the Montana sheriff."

Holden said, "Then you'd have played along with Branch if he'd opened this town to gamblin'?"

"Why not?" Morgan shrugged. "It'd be money in my pocket."

"Why are you double-crossin' John Branch?" Sid Hockins asked.

Morgan laughed, harshly. "You know I've always hated his guts." He reached up to settle his Stetson on his head more firmly and stepped back to the door, opening it and saying before he stepped out: "Good day, gentlemen. I'll be waiting for results."

For a full half minute after the door had closed Hockins and Rex Holden let the ominous silence drag out. Then Hockins said sharply, "Damned if I believe it, Rex!"

"I don't want to, but there's no choice here." Holden pointed to the telegram.

Hockins let a long gusty sigh escape him and queried lifelessly, "What'll we do?"

"Give John his chance."

"How?"

"Wait until tonight. You'll see, Sid. Get Charley and a couple other men you can trust and meet me at the feed barn right after it gets dark."

IV

IT was a bad day for Ed Sims. He had been across the street that morning when the stage arrived. He'd seen Deuce Morgan get his telegram from the driver, seen Morgan go to the bank with Sid Hockins. Morgan's smile had been that of a satisfied man. Ed didn't know what to think.

The two times he'd seen Sheriff John Branch that afternoon convinced him that the law man was held by the same nervousness that possessed him. Branch had read Morgan's telegram yesterday afternoon; he was waiting helplessly for the inevitable, wondering why it didn't come.

A feeling of foreboding made Ed go back to the jail-office after eating his meal that night. Something akin to foreboding brought John Branch back to the office, too. The sheriff had only a brief word for his deputy before he took his chair. When it got dark enough to need light, neither man moved to touch a match to the wick of the lamp.

They were sitting there, silently, each mulling over his own thoughts, when they heard the heavy tramp of many boots on the walk outside. Ed Sims' involuntary gesture was to let his right hand fall to the gun at his thigh.

The door opened and Ed could barely make out Rex Holden's form in the opening. He took his hand away from his gun as Holden said, "John, you there?"

"Here, Rex," John Branch answered. The springs of his swivel-chair squeaked and he struck a match and lit his lamp. Holden came in, and was followed by Sid Hockins, Charley Riley and two men Ed Sims hadn't seen before. The last in closed the door.

Holden stepped in close to the sheriff's desk. "Let me have your gun, John."

Branch's glance turned quizzical. "My gun? Why, Rex?"

"It'll make it harder to talk the thing out," Holden said. "Morgan brought a telegram around to my office this mornin', John."

Those brief words made a subtle change ride through Coyote Wells' sheriff. He reached down, unbuckled his gun-belt and laid it on his desk.

"You, too, Sims," Sid Hockins said.

Ed's hand had strayed toward the handle of the Colt's at his right thigh. With a deceptively lazy gesture he now drew the weapon, rising up out of his chair and swinging the blunt-nosed .45 so that it covered every man in the room. "Not me," he said. "You're all makin' a mistake."

"Give 'em your iron, Ed," John Branch said, lifelessly. "I had this comin'."

For a moment Ed Sims hesitated. The sheriff's words left him numb, disbelieving this admission of guilt on the part of a man these two days had taught him to respect. Finally, seeing that nothing he could do would change things, he lowered his weapon and handed it across to Hockins, along with his second .45.

"We've got horses out at the edge of town," Rex Holden announced. "We're headin' straight for the county line. We're giving you and your partner here a chance, John."

"My partner!" Branch said. "Sims isn't in this."

"I told you talkin' wouldn't help things, John."

The sheriff had the look of an old man as he got out of his chair; his look was resigned. He glanced toward Ed, shrugged as though in apology, and went toward the door. All the way along the street, out past the awnings and the plank walks, he didn't raise his head. It was as though he was watching where he put his feet, afraid to trust them to pick their own ground.

They went out the west trail at a fast trot, taking two hours to bring the lights of Pinnacle into sight. They swung wide of the town, and two miles beyond it Rex Holden, in the lead, reined in on his bay horse and waited for the others to gather around him.

The light of the stars was strong enough so that Ed Sims caught the look Holden fixed on John Branch. There was no loathing in that glance; only a faint hint of a hurt deep inside the man. Holden held out John Branch's gun. "Good luck, John," he said, tonelessly. "We'll tell Ellen in the mornin', after you've put plenty of miles behind you."

BRANCH took the proffered gun, belted it on in silence. Then: "Rex, make it as easy for her as you can. Tell her . . ." His words trailed off to leave the sentence unfinished.

"I'll think it over tonight, John. I'll think of something to tell her."

Sid Hockins handed Ed his guns, saying softly, "You're lucky we didn't string you up, brother!"

The five of them wheeled their horses and rode out of sight into the darkness. For a long moment John Branch sat his saddle staring after them. Then feelingly, softly, he cursed. Long checked anger had its way with him. Ed waited until it wore off, then said:

"There's a few things I haven't got straight. Let's have it from the beginnin', sheriff."

Branch told his story, told it all, even to guessing what answer the Montana sheriff had telegraphed Deuce Morgan.

"But he couldn't have told Morgan that," Ed said. And then he told John Branch of his ride to the way-station beyond Pinnacle last night, of the wire he'd sent in place of Morgan's, of his fight with the station-agent.

John Branch laughed at hearing this last. It was a harsh laugh, one with little mirth in it. "So you whipped Bill Scudder?" he said. "I'd have given a lot to see that. Bill once ran a faro layout for Morgan. He's as forked as a coil of rope."

Suddenly Ed Sims halfway understood what had happened. He thought the thing through, saw Deuce Morgan's part in it, and with the cold anger of a man who won't stay long beaten he said to the sheriff, bitingly, "You looked at first like a man with guts."

John Branch's eyes took on a hardness Ed could catch even in this half-light. "Careful, Sims! They tramped on me because I let them, because every man that rode out here with us tonight has been my friend for the last twenty years. You're a stranger. I don't take talk like this from a stranger."

Ed reined his horse a little away from

the law man. "Get goin', then. I'm headin' back for Coyote Wells—by way of Bill Scudder's place."

John Branch's glance narrowed. His anger of a moment ago visibly left him. "Back to the Wells? What for, Sims?"

"To see Morgan. He don't throw a big enough shadow to make this stick with me."

Branch was silent a moment, considering. Abruptly his boot-heels swung out, then in, ramming his spurs into his horse's flanks. As the animal lunged into a quick run, taking the law man past his deputy, he said, "You'll have to make tracks if you're stickin' with me."

V

REX HOLDEN and Sid Hockins had stayed to help the stable-owner rub down their ponies and were finishing their smokes at the feed-barn door. There wasn't much talk, for both of them knew that words were a waste of breath. What had happened tonight would never be talked about between them. John Branch was gone and no one but the five who had seen him to the county line would ever know why he had gone—not even Ellen Branch.

"See you in the mornin'," Sid Hockins said, as he dropped his cigarette and ground its glowing red ash beneath his boot-heel.

Rex Holden didn't answer immediately. He was looking up the street at three mounted riders who had swung in at the hitch-rail in front of the *Lucky Girl*. At length, he said sharply, "Take a look up there, Sid. At the saloon!"

Hockins' glance travelled up the street. What he saw made his plump face settle in rock-like scrutiny. He drawled, "John wouldn't be damn' fool enough to pull a trick like this! But it's him! Come on." He started up the walk at a run. Rex Holden followed.

They weren't in time to see how it began. By the time they shouldered their way through the swing-doors, Bill Scudder was lying on the floor, his shoulders propped against the bar-front. His shirt was torn across his bruised chest. A lump the size of a hen's egg swelled his right eyebrow, closing the eye beneath. His lips were swollen and dried blood etched two thin streaks of red from the corners of his mouth to the curve of his chin.

Ed Sims was standing alongside him, back to the doors. John Branch stood on the far side of the plate-glass window to the left of the doors his hand on his holstered six-gun. And at the rear end of the bar stood Deuce Morgan, flanked by his bar-tender and a tall thickset individual known as Spike, the *Lucky Girl's* bouncer.

Ed Sims was saying, "Scudder talked, Morgan, told us how he rode over here last night. It's a federal offense for a telegraph operator to forge a message."

"That's Scudder's business," Deuce Morgan drawled. His look took in the abrupt appearance of Rex Holden and Sid Hockins through the doors and his jaw snapped shut.

"Make your play, Morgan," Ed Sims taunted. His hands hung at his sides, loosely, his eyes fixed on the bulge of the shoulder-holster at Morgan's left armpit. "Make it fast, Morgan!"

From the front, John Branch's level voice intoned, "Stay out of this, Ed. It's my turn now."

Deuce Morgan's left elbow crooked to prod his bartender. The aproned man suddenly whirled and stepped behind the bar, hand reaching under it for the shotgun that always hung there in its rack. Spike, at the other side of the saloon-owner, stabbed his right hand for his holstered weapon as Morgan's hand streaked upward.

Deuce Morgan was fast, so fast that no man could have studied the move of his hand and told afterward how it was that it snaked in so surely under his coat and palmed out the heavy weapon from its holster.

As Morgan moved, Bill Scudder gathered his legs under him and suddenly dove at Ed Sims. Ed's .45 was blurring upward with a swiftness that left no doubt as to his beating Morgan's draw. But as the gun settled into line Scudder's frame caught Ed at the knees and knocked him sideways. His Colt's swung out of line and as it thundered a foot-long chip flew from the bar at Morgan's elbow.

Deuce Morgan hesitated a fraction of a second, not wanting to hit Scudder. That instant's pause gave John Branch

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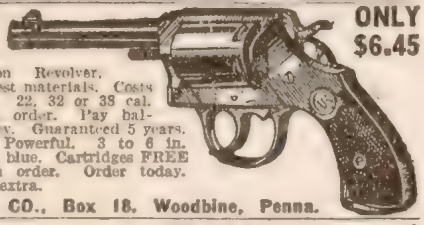

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the time he needed. He took sure aim with his six-gun and squeezed the trigger. The bullet caught Deuce Morgan as he swung his hand through the two-inch arc that would have lined his weapon at the sheriff. His body jerked backward, slammed into the wall and he slid to the floor and sat there his head sagging inhumanly onto his chest where a splotch of red centered his white shirt-front.

FROM the floor, Ed Sims whipped his gun down in a tight fanning blow that caught Bill Scudder squarely on the temple and loosened his burly frame in the limpness of unconsciousness. Ed's .45 completed that half-circle swing and lined at the bartender as he swung up the sawed-off shotgun from behind his counter. Ed's second shot prolonged the blast of John Branch's gun, punctuated the instant the bartender's shotgun was wrenched from his grasp by an unseen blow. The bartender shook his numb broken right hand and clenched it with his left.

Spike threw a snap-shot at the floor. Ed's high-built frame shuddered as the bullet caught him squarely in the right shoulder. He moved his wrist a scant two inches as his arm went numb, and his gun jumped across to his left hand to settle immediately into line and stab out an explosion that seemed to beat Spike back into the wall. The man's gun dropped to the sawdust floor, and as he fell his face was set rigidly in its last living grimace. Ed's bullet had taken him cleanly through the throat.

Seconds later, Rex Holden helped Ed to his feet, ripped his shirt away and took a look at his shoulder, calling to one of the crowd that was forming at the doors, "Someone get a doctor!"

John Branch looked at Sid Hockins as though waking from a dream. Some inner thought made his grizzled face take on a slow smile. He handed his gun

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across to Sid, saying, "I won't need this any more."

Later, in Deuce Morgan's office, Rex Holden faced Coyote Wells' sheriff: "John, this was a fool's play, comin' back here the way you did! Now we won't be able to keep this quiet."

Ed Sims jerked upright in his chair, wrenching a bandage from the doctor's hand so that it fell to the floor. He looked coldly at Rex Holden and drawled, "You're a fine bunch of sidewinders! Why don't you ask Branch for the whole story?"

"Well?" Holden said, glancing across at Branch who sat in a chair against the far wall.

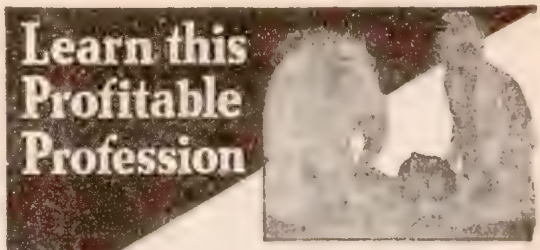
The sheriff shrugged. "You know all there is. I'm wanted for horse-stealin'."

"Tell him the rest," Ed said insistently, angered by the law man's meekness. He waited a moment; Branch had the look of a beaten man, shoulders sagging heavily, glance directed downward at the floor.

"Branch did what you or any man with guts would have done," he said. "Twenty years ago the Broad Arrow had northern Montana by the tail. It made its own law, put its sticky loop on more rustled critters than any ten outfits north of the Canadian. They pushed every small rancher off free range. Ask Branch about it."

Rex Holden said, "Let's have it, John."

Branch's head came up. Something in Ed Sims' words had fanned alive a flame of stubbornness within him. He nodded his head, solemnly: "I hadn't thought of it that way for years," he said. "A man forgets, lookin' back at a wrong. But it's like Sims says. Any man with guts would have bridled under the kind of hand they dealt me. First Broad Arrow broke me by stealin' my one small herd, then hired me to ride at starvation wages. There was nothin' I could do—until their hired law man tried to arrest me for riggin' a forked stud game one night. I beat him to the draw and somehow kept from pullin' the trigger. I got out of town. Two nights later Blaze Hefflin and three more of us ran off two hundred head of Broad Arrow bronco, drove 'em across the border and sold 'em to a Canadian outfit. I never saw a cent of the money we got for those lugheads. But it made up a little for what they'd



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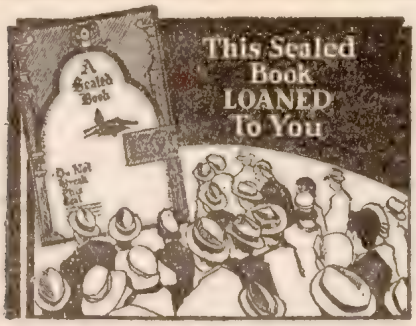

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done to me."

There was a tense, long-drawn silence following Branch's words. In that interval Ellen Branch stepped quietly into the doorway. Ed Sims saw her, knew by the look in her tear-filled brown eyes that she had heard her father's words. That look had its touch of pride.

Rex Holden, his back to the door, suddenly blurted out, "John, you addle-headed old fool! Why didn't you tell us this sooner? We wouldn't have let Morgan run his bluff!"

John Branch hadn't seen his daughter, and now he said, "There was more than me to think of. If it hadn't been for . . ."

"Dad!" Ellen came into the room. She started to say something, and instead of saying it leaned down and tenderly kissed her father on the forehead.

WHEN she straightened she saw Ed Sims for the first time. His shoulder bandage was already splotched with blood that had soaked through it. He was hurt, badly. Out on the street not two minutes ago the man Rex Holden had put at the saloon-doors to keep the crowd back had let her through, nodding to the two bodies along the far wall, then to the office door, saying, "Your father's in there, Miss. If it hadn't been for that new deputy he'd be out here with these other two." Remembering that, remembering her heated words of yesterday when she'd called Ed Sims a killer, she felt suddenly humbled.

"Ed," she said, haltingly, hardly knowing how to begin. "Can I say I'm sorry?"

Her words brought a flush of obvious embarrassment to Ed Sims' pain-drawn face. "No reason for that," he said. "We all make mistakes."

"You're staying, aren't you?" she queried. "You're staying to help Dad?"

He nodded, and the slight tension of his neck muscles set up a pain in his shoulder that deepened the lines on his lean face. Ellen saw that, turned to the doctor and said, "He's coming up to stay with us until that shoulder gets well." She looked once more at Ed Sims before she went out with her father; and that one look made Ed think, strangely enough, that he wouldn't be riding north tomorrow morning as he'd planned. That he might never be riding out of here.

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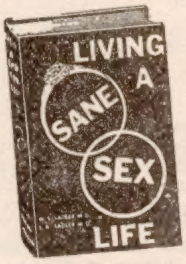

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Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who twice won the title of "World's Most Perfectly Developed man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

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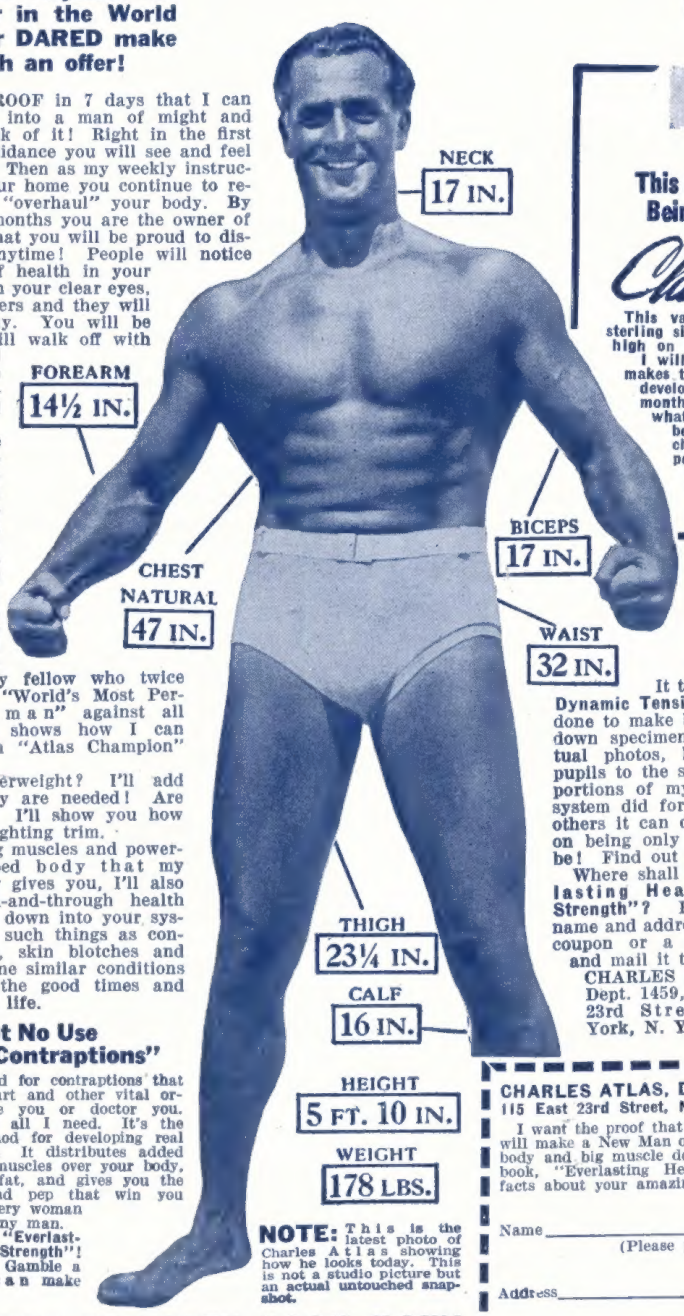

NOTE: This is the latest photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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I haven't any need for contraptions that may strain your heart and other vital organs. I don't dose you or doctor you. **Dynamic Tension** is all I need. It's the natural, tested method for developing real men inside and out. It distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over your body, gets rid of surplus fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep that win you the admiration of every woman and the respect of any man.

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STOP THAT ITCHING AND SCRATCHING

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28 at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

There are many other names given to this disease, but you can easily tell if you have it.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form and the skin cracks and peels. After a while the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

FOOT-ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)

Send Coupon-Don't Pay till Relieved

Beware of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

It has been said that this disease originated in the trenches, so some people call it Trench Foot. Whatever name you give it, however, the thing to do is to get rid of it as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

Here's How to Treat It

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows that it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the infected skin and works its way deep into the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

Itching Stops Immediately

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. Sent on FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money, don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you we know that you will be glad to send us $1.00 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

Mail this Coupon

GORE PRODUCTS, INC., AF
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Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better I will send you $1.00. If I am not entirely satisfied I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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